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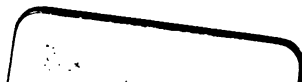
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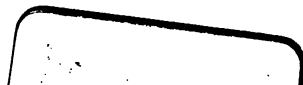


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THE DAYS OF HIS VANITY.

BOOK THE FIRST.

CHAPTER I.

ERNEST TEMPEST.

"Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth."—*Ecclesiastes.*

THE sun is shining on the river, and the river is streaming on. Away to the east, the sun shines on the golden cross of St. Paul's; away to the west, it glistens on the gilt-work of the Westminster clock-tower. About midway between them, it is lighting up old Middle Temple Hall. The

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fountain is playing quietly amongst the trees; and but a court or two away, St. Clement Danes is chiming the old tune. The tall, quaint chambers of the Templars cluster round, looking half cheerful in the morning sun.

Upon the door of one of these, the name of "Ernest Tempest" is inscribed; and Ernest Tempest is the gentleman of whom we are in search. Come up this staircase—mind your head against that archway—and don't fear lest he should think you an attorney. Being a barrister, just called, an attorney is the last sort of person who is likely to visit him.

True, there were plenty of them here last month, congratulating him on his approaching dignity, and overwhelming him with protestations of the piles of papers they should soon be bringing him. But

now, the student has developed into the practitioner; and the liberal promises have fallen due. It is remarkable, what has become of those attorneys. Ernest might have feared some shocking epidemic had carried off the whole profession, if he hadn't, one day, chanced to see the most enthusiastic gentleman of all, armed with a sheaf of papers, disappearing in the chambers of old Blenkinsop, next door. None of them come near him. Moreover, it is Sunday, and the attorneys are saying their prayers.

Why isn't Tempest? I'm afraid he doesn't trouble churches very much. At first, he attended pretty regularly at the far-famed Temple—chiefly, I think, from that vague sort of conviction, which he felt in common with so many people, that there is something praiseworthy in going to church, no matter to what church you go or what

you hear ; but he never cared much for sacred concerts, and the sight of the head-porters at the gate, and the fine ladies and gentlemen being passed in by tickets, shocked, and finally disgusted him, with the whole business.

At present, he is lounging over a late breakfast, trying to extract some information or amusement out of a Sunday newspaper.

He is a rather tall, well-knit, young man of five and twenty ; of a light complexion, and an open but grave countenance—not handsome. With the enthusiasm of youth, and animated by the spirit of the ancient rule that barristers must be clean-shaved—in the old days, when a barrister meant a speaker, and not a man who never finishes a sentence, and who can't be heard for his moustache—he has relieved his face of that

embroidery which makes most men so commonplace. Perhaps the most noticeable things about him are his eyes, which are not large or brilliant, but of that clear grey there is no getting to the bottom of; which stamp him at a glance, as being of an intellect above the average. Add to this, that rarest and most advantageous of all physical endowments, a voice that can be heard, and there is Ernest Tempest.

Possessed of natural gifts like these, just five and twenty, launched in London, with the world before him, his own master, and a member of a proud profession—should he not be happy? According to the universal evidence of age, youth is always happy. I think, when men grow old, they must forget their young experiences, or surely they would never say such foolish things. There is no age that has a mono-

poly of either happiness or sorrow. The man who says that childhood is an age of pleasure unalloyed, must surely have forgotten that he ever was a child. The child has his sorrows just as surely, quite as keenly, as the man; and he is less able to bear them. Yea, is any the profoundest grief of manhood quite so dreadful as the blank, helpless terrors of a child? And if the carking cares and stern anxieties of manhood, if the grief of disappointed hopes and frustrated ambitions, if the loss of wife and the going astray of child, the silent passing of old friends away, and the regretful retrospect of age, be hard to bear—if it be sad to sit surveying our past life, and see the bricks and stones, with which we meant to build our castle in the air, lying in wild disorder on the plain—has youth no pangs, has the young man no

sorrows? Ah yes, conceited age, God's world, even of woe, is not all yours. If with your knowledge of mankind and your experience of life, you could be young again, the world would be your football; but remember, the young man has got these things to learn: and is there any grief in life more desolating than the beginning of that learning? There is, under the sun, nothing so saddening as disillusion. Pains may be borne, anxieties may be endured, but disillusion saps the very life; and disillusion is the young man's lot.

I imagine that nobody, who is anybody, reaches the age of five and twenty, without having been inspired with some ideal of life, and some ambition to live worthily and do some good in his generation; and probably, nobody has attained that age, without having had his ideal knocked on the head,

and without getting involved in the utmost perplexity as to what is living worthily and how it is possible to do any good to anybody. It must be a sad day for a thoughtful child — and there are many thoughtful children—when he first begins to see that all the moral stories his religious parents have instilled in him are just so many lies. It is a melancholy day for the youth, when he discerns the falsity of the poetical justice of fiction—when he first begins to understand that the hero doesn't marry the heroine at the end of the third volume of his real life, but marries quite another person, and has many children. Not only is the knowledge painful in itself, but his whole idea of existence is confounded. Similarly, it is a woeful day for the young man, when he begins to see that his ideal of life is founded on false premises,

and that the superstructure is a house of cards — when first he understands that nearly all the recognised ways of doing good, are merely so many ingenious, indirect ways of doing harm ; and that to know how to be of any use to anybody or to anything, is just the one most difficult problem in the world.

Tempest was in this condition. Educated in the best of schools, and brought up under the influence of the most liberal and least mischievous of all religions, he had grown up in a noble admiration of all that he considered good, and a proud scorn of all that he considered base. Doctrine had never troubled him much : he had, long since, swept aside those cobwebs. He had quite got rid of any lingering respect for great authorities : for had he not heard bishops, noted for their piety and learning,

invested with all the solemnity of their high office, talking stuff which would have shamed a schoolboy? He had been quite cured of the pernicious notion, that a man ought not to think much of this world ; and was persuaded that the one good thing was just to do his duty in the world in which his God had caused him to be born. He had a definite idea what was right, and what was wrong : he worshipped good men, and he hated bad. Alas for his ideas and his resolutions, he has just begun to find out, that there are no good men, and no bad men either ; that good and evil are inextricably interwoven in the composition of all men and things ; that right and wrong are not marked out by any boundary ; and that the difficulty is, to know what is one's duty. No man can be happy, when his whole idea of life turns out to be a

fallacy, and all his guides and monitors
“blind leaders of the blind.”

But Tempest was not miserable. His experience was only just beginning, and he had not yet arrived at more than the first stage of that “increase of knowledge” which is “increase of sorrow.” And he had, at any rate, found his own legs. If he had lost confidence in those upon whom he had hitherto relied, he was relieved of the oppression of the admonitions he had hitherto obeyed, even where he had failed to understand them. He exercised his own discretion as to what he did, or did not. He no longer felt wicked, if he omitted to go to church, or to say his prayers when he was disinclined. He felt the satisfaction as well as the responsibility of being his own master, and he “walked in the ways of his heart and in the sight of his eyes.”

Upon the whole, however, the “ways of his heart” were not evil ways. Not only was he inspired with an abstract respect for what is good, when what is good can be divined with a reasonable amount of probability—a condition of mind which is quite compatible with considerable latitude of conduct—but he was influenced by that most powerful of all deterrents from evil, the reflection that the consequences of wrong-doing are for the most part visited, not on the wrong-doer himself, but upon others. He had quite got over the moral story notion that to do wrong means to be unhappy, either in this world or some other world to come : he had learnt, on the contrary, that evil consequences were the last things to be dreaded, so far as his own person was concerned : but on the other hand, he had the knowledge, that whatever

seed of evil he might sow, would certainly be reaped and harvested by some one else. At the same time, he was very human, and he fell far short of his own principles. He was unable always to withstand temptation. Gross sins had no fascination for him, but sin is not always gross. What fool first gave the devil his horns and tail? Alas, he generally comes to us in the guise of an angel.

Still, his conscience was not very troublesome. Whose conscience is? That restless and uncomfortable feeling which is ascribed by moralists to an uneasy conscience, will, if analysed, resolve itself in the majority of instances into nothing more moral than the terror of detection.

Conscience is a very torpid organ, and requires a monstrous deal of stirring up. It is a most immoral but irrefragable fact,

that natural disposition has a great deal more to do with happiness than either guilt or innocence. Some men could make themselves perfectly comfortable after murdering their mothers ; others find it impossible to be thoroughly happy under any circumstances : and the latter are but too often the best and most virtuous of men. Probably, the most blessed gift under the sun, is the gift of a cheerful disposition : and this was not Ernest's. His mind was by nature of a pensive turn, and all his thoughts inclined to melancholy. And thus it came about, that he was seldom altogether happy, though he was not wretched. He could enjoy the social intercourse of his companions, who were none of the bar-parlour or the dinner-party class ; but when he was alone, his mind was just about attuned to the dropping of

the fountain and the chime of old St. Clement's.

Dear old St. Clement's, with its "oranges and lemons!" Does any Templar live, who has not chiming in some corner of his heart that old refrain? Hear it but casually in the noisy Strand, and it may have no great effect upon your mind; but live within the sound of those quaint bells, hear them at noon amidst the glare of day, hear them at night amidst the stillness of the stars, noon after noon, night after night, hour after hour, for months and years; and they will sink into your heart; and the childish catchphrase, which probably enough some silly nurse-girl first invented, will come to have a depth of meaning, a strange subtle influence, and a halo of association, which is wanting in the finest poem. It had sunk deep down into the heart of Ernest Tempest.

Sometimes, when he was excited, the bells rang quite jauntily, and “oranges and lemons” seemed the merriest tune out : but as a rule, they had a soft, sad sound, which, everlastingly repeated in the same sweet monotone, grew melancholy : and it seemed to him as if the old bells sympathised with him in all his troubles, and sang to him ; until he got to love them, like a sort of mother, in his solitude ; and “oranges and lemons” always seemed to him attuned to the beginning of his life.

CHAPTER II.

GEORGE DRUMMOND.

"One man among a thousand have I found."

Ecclesiastes.

A QUICK step, coming up the staircase at three bounds a flight, preludes a sturdy rap upon the chamber door.

"Come in," shouted Tempest; and an active-looking, dark-haired man, of eight and twenty, with a pair of mutton-chop whiskers, put his head inside the room.

"What, up already?" said the visitor, "it's only just eleven."

"Come in, George," said his host; not

deigning to take any notice of this imputation on his habits.

“ Well, how are you getting on ? ” inquired the other, in that cheerful tone in which a man who is beginning to see his way, inquires about another who is not. “ Any briefs yet ? ”

“ How am I getting on ? ” growled Tempest ; “ not at all. Nobody will trust me to do anything.”

“ It was the same with me at the beginning,” said his friend. “ When I was in the hospitals, I did all sorts of ticklish jobs ; but when I started on my own account, I wasn’t trusted to cure Mrs. Jones’s gathered finger : whilst as to the Smiths’ baby——”

“ Don’t let’s talk about it,” interrupted Ernest. “ I don’t feel the slightest interest in the subject.”

“Neither do I,” laughed the surgeon, “though it isn’t half-an-hour since I was hugging it, and calling it the prettiest little baby ever anyone did see.”

“What, were you dosing it?”

“I had that pleasure; and I rather think the Smiths are having a nice time of it this afternoon.”

“I’m afraid you have been visiting the sins of the father on the child, George.”

“Say the mother, and you’re right. She snubbed me for a long time, Ernest, and I’m always very civil and attentive to her; but I’ve taken my revenge out of that baby, I can tell you,” and the surgeon rubbed his hands complacently.

“Well, will you have a smoke?” asked Tempest.

“Smoke, my dear fellow! did you say a

smoke ? with one of my professional coats on ! I couldn't think of such a thing."

"That means that I mustn't either, I suppose."

"Well, I don't go so far as to say that, you know. Suppose I put my coat in your blue bag," replied the doctor, already in his shirt-sleeves. "You can smoke now—and it just occurs to me that I can too."

The pipes are soon at work, and the two friends engrossed in that dead silence which so often is the best companionship.

The doctor was the first to break it. It was characteristic of the two, that he generally was. By nature, less contemplative and reticent than Tempest—though sufficiently reflective and intelligent—George Drummond was at present in the fresh enjoyment of that first exhilaration of

beginning to make way in one's profession.

"Ernest," he resumed, "I'm going to be married."

"The devil!" exclaimed the barrister. "This comes of getting on. The fact is, you've been making too much money lately, and it's turned your head."

"Well, Ernest," said the doctor, apologetically, "the fact is, it's necessary to be married, to get on in medicine."

"Bosh!" returned the barrister, "you've fallen in love with somebody."

"I have," confessed the surgeon.

"Well, who is it?"

"Her name's Vane—Agnes Vane."

"And what's she like?"

"Oh, she's not beautiful—to look at. I hate beauties. One gets so tired of looking at them. There's no relief to the eye. It's

like looking at the sun—without the variety of the spots.”

“ Well, if she isn’t beautiful, what is she ?”

“ Ernest, have you ever seen an angel ?”

“ Yes, a hundred ; and a commonplace lot they are, generally.”

“ Ah, you evidently haven’t seen a seraph ; but I’ll show you one, this morning.”

“ Do you mean Miss Vane ?”

“ I do. I promised to take you to dinner to her mother’s.”

“ But shan’t I be interrupting——”

“ What ?”

“ The conversation of celestial beings.”

“ Not at all, man ; you can entertain her sister—do you see ?”

“ She has a sister, has she ?”

“ Yes, a very pretty one : just turned seventeen. She’ll do for you.”

"And where does Miss Vane live?"

"At Kensington."

"Oh, not in heaven?"

"Man," said the doctor, "Kensington is heaven. If we start now, we shall just catch them coming out of church."

"Do angels go to church?" inquired the barrister.

"Mine does, at any rate. Put out your pipe, and help me on with my professional coat. I must call in and touch up the Smiths' baby as we pass."

"Poor little cherub!" sighed the barrister, locking the door behind him.

"Cherub a fiddle!" snarled the surgeon.

"Seraph a fiddle, too! Both have to have their dinner every day."

This there was no denying. That dreadful dinner argument takes the romance out of existence. It is a "touch of nature"

which makes all men kin, be they barristers or doctors ; and so, law and medicine cried a truce, and went in search of dinner, arm-in-arm.

CHAPTER III.

THE VANES.

“Keep thy foot when thou goest to the House of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools.”—*Ecclesiastes*.

THOSE objectionable people who have been all over the globe, are uncommonly fond of telling us about the many glorious things which they have seen, and we have not. But it is all humbug. The fairest objects heaven has vouchsafed earth swarm in the streets of London every day. What is Niagara to a comely woman? What is the Bay of Naples to a pretty girl?

Amongst the many churches which the sun is shining on, is one in Kensington. The sun is streaming through the stained-glass windows, and the organ is reverberating through the building, with a grave "Amen." The sun is shining straight upon a little handkerchief, which is pressed against the ledge of a pew, and surmounted by a feathery little bonnet. Ah, what is any scenery to the face beneath it? A fairy face, though too unformed as yet to bear the perfect beauty which it promises. Too girlish to be yet supremely fair, not intellectual, but sunny as the sun. A face which scarcely looks the face of seventeen. Instinct with only half the feelings and perceptions of a woman, frank with half the naïveté of a girl. Freedom and constraint have each got part possession of it, and contend together on that sunny

countenance ; which is now staid with soberness, and now alight with glee.

How good she looks, saying her prayers into her pocket-handkerchief ! How good all girls—about to squander their glorious beauty upon fops and fools—look, when they are saying their prayers ! But then, how good these other people look—these men who finance, and these women who marry for money — calling themselves “ miserable sinners ” with the most comfortable penitence imaginable. Life is not all church-going.

There is a lady sitting by her side—not an old lady, but a lady with a white still face, which also has been beautiful, that has seen more than years. Her eyes, too, are bent upon the pew ; but they seem to be looking through it, into the past. To that pale quiet face, you see at once, a

story is attached : and she is looking back upon it, as we are looking forward upon ours. So the world wags. So we pass one another by—some stories ending and some beginning—each thinking of his own—these looking forward with gladness, and those looking back with sadness. The sadness was gladness once, and pityingly gazed upon by sadness dead and gone : the gladness will be sadness some day, and will pityingly gaze on gladness yet unborn : while the sun shines on the river, and the river streams along.

She has been merry in her time, this pale-faced lady. She has built stately castles in the air, and laid the gilt on with a lavish hand. She has sat with her bright eyes looking into the future, as she sits with her dull eyes looking into the past. Poor, pale-faced lady ! The castles

have long since mouldered, and the guilt has vanished. Alas, not all this going to church, and all this saying of prayers, can hinder women being beautiful, and suffering.

But hush ! The rector—a good, amiable, white-haired, worthy gentleman, whom we may meet again—is giving out the text ; and we must listen to the sermon. “ *Then came Peter to Him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times : but, Until seventy times seven.*”

And what do you think the good, amiable, white-haired, worthy gentleman had to say about these words of Jesus ? Positively this : that seventy times seven was four hundred and ninety, and that if we didn’t forgive our neighbours at least four hundred and ninety times, we should incur the dis-

pleasure of heaven ; but Scripture being silent as to offence the four hundred and ninety-first, some latitude was left to human resentment.

And now the other old gentlemen begin to rouse themselves, and the old ladies thank heaven they have forgiven five hundred offences in the money to which they have married their daughters ; and the congregation, being duly blessed, begin to leave the building. As the sad lady and glad maiden turn out of the gate, the barrister and doctor turn the corner ; and the maiden's face, which was just now as long as a fiddle, is immediately electrical with glances.

"Just in time," exclaimed the doctor. "Mrs. Vane, I've brought a gentleman to dinner — my friend, Mr. Tempest — Mrs. Vane."

And when Mrs. Vane had shaken hands with Ernest—in a casual, off-hand way, the doctor added, “Mr. Tempest—Miss Rosamond Vane,”—and in a casual, off-hand way, Ernest shook hands with her.

It is in these casual, off-hand ways, we meet our fates.

“But where is Agnes?” asked the surgeon, looking round.

“Oh, Agnes has been sitting upstairs, with the Sunday scholars,” said her sister.

“And why haven’t *you*?”

“Me!” cried the maiden, scornfully.

“Yes, you.”

“It’s quite as much as Rosamond can do to keep herself in order,” put in Mrs. Vane.

“More,” said the surgeon : and the little nose was still more elevated.

"I don't think she will be long," continued Mrs. Vane ; and Agnes joined them, as she spoke.

The surgeon was quite right. She was not beautiful—that is to say, her features were not regular, or very finely formed. The only grace about her face was the grace of human goodness : but it did not need much other ornament. There was a likeness between the two sisters, which was undeniable ; and yet one was pretty, and the other was plain. It is strange, how frequently one child monopolises all the beauty of a family ; and, stranger still, how wonderfully like it, its plain sisters often are, and yet are very commonplace indeed. It was Rosamond who was the beauty, undeniably ; and yet it did not want two glances at the plainer face, to tell you that the man had chosen wisely.

Education is a powerful agent, but it cannot alter nature. You may draw out of a man all sorts of feelings and capacities, which were before unknown in him and unimagined ; but the germs of those capacities and feelings must be in his nature. You can only foster and mature the mind and heart you have to deal with. You can only make it perfect of its sort : you cannot make it perfect of some other sort. The leopard cannot change his spots, and you can't do it for him.

Here are two girls, brought up, so far as mortal observation goes, beneath precisely the same influences. The one is vain, ambitious, passionate, and charming : the other is meek, modest, gentle, and humane. Praise the latter, if you like ; but don't condemn the former. Virtue comes more easily to some of us than others : and if

there ever were a day of righteous judgment, much allowance would be made for those whom God created beautiful.

As the five walk along, it is a pleasant sight to see the fondness of these girls for the sad lady by their side—fondness expressed in many a hundred little ways of word, and glance, and gesture ; but all the same, it is not very difficult to guess whose love is worth the more. Nor is it quite impossible to tell which of her daughters the sad lady worships. She loves both.

Some moralists maintain, that parents ought to have no favourites amongst their children ; but if love is to be something more than a mechanical performance, it is difficult to understand how mothers can help loving most the children who are the most lovable. This same love has a curious way of setting moralists at defiance ;

and the experience of life is against those philosophers. At the same time, let it not be thought, that the sad lady manifests a partiality. There are few things she would not do for either of her daughters ; and it is evident only to the closest observation, that in one of them she lives.

The five walk slowly on, under the sun, to where a small, white house shines through the leafy trees. And while the ladies go through that protracted operation known as " taking off their things," a word or two about this same establishment.

For many years has Mrs. Vane resided here ; and for as many has the neighbourhood been wondering where she came from, and on what she lives. Why it should settle upon Mrs. Vane, as a focus of curiosity, sooner than upon any other widow lady with two daughters, living upon what

her husband has bequeathed her, it is hard to say. It may have been because she did not shroud herself in crape, and besprinkle her conversation with affectionate allusions to the dear departed. Certain it is, she never mentioned him to strangers; and her daughters were not able to give any information, either as to what he was, or where he came from. Neither of them had ever seen him to her knowledge: therefore, neither of them mourned him; and all they seemed to know about him was, that he had died when they were very young. I don't believe the neighbourhood was altogether satisfied that he was dead at all. Suburban noses are very keen on the scent of anything mysterious; and there was certainly some mystery attached to Mrs. Vane. Good-looking widows, who seem only about five and thirty, don't usually go about with

white wan faces, and with eyes always looking into the past. They are generally looking for a husband, and pretty steadily fixed upon the main chance. But the neighbourhood was on the wrong trail altogether, when it scented a stiff, grey-haired gentleman who used to call on Mrs. Vane occasionally: the truth being, that he was a solicitor—the trustee under her settlement—and his visits were purely professional. It was upon the income she derived from this source, Mrs. Vane maintained her household.

Ernest soon dropped comfortably in his place at the small dinner-table. There was no nonsense about this little family. He was silently made welcome, and he was not disconcerted with an excess of attention. Mrs. Vane and both her daughters had a quiet way of putting everybody at their ease, and

did not overwhelm them with polite remarks, which are so very difficult to answer. They did not belong to that dreadful class of people known as "hospitable," who watch everything you put into your mouth, and remark, "What a very poor dinner you are making," and are quite unhappy if you don't eat far more than you want, and drink a great deal more than does you any good. Best of all, he found that this was one of those delightful houses where there is real conversation—that is to say, where you are free to say whatever comes into your head, without a fear of shocking anybody's sentiments or wounding anybody's feelings. For instance, if in natural conversation you gave utterance to sceptical, heretical, or even communistic sentiments, however much your observations might be disagreed with, you would not have fired a

bomb and startled the whole circle into silence ; neither would you be regarded as a dreadful person, quite outside the pale of human sympathy, nor even as an uncomfortable companion. At the same time, in this world there lives no better girl than Agnes Vane ; but she is one of those rare persons, who are able to be good and really religious, without making anyone uncomfortable. You never saw her sitting in the awful stateliness of silent disapproval, or in any other situation of obtrusive virtue. You might even use a slang expression in her presence, without a fear of being considered "not a gentleman." A young person once informed me, her idea of a gentleman was "one who always opened the door for a lady : " and she gave me, as her definition of what constituted "not a gentleman," "a man who wore light trousers in winter!"

There was no consummate nonsense of this sort about the Vanes. You felt that you were never judged by any trivial or accidental test, but that the substance of your character was understood, and viewed with broad and liberal charity. In a word, you were amongst sensible people.

"Now, Mrs. Vane," exclaimed the surgeon, over the dessert, "what is to be, has to be; and the sooner it is, the better for all parties concerned."

"Which being translated, means——" began Miss Rosamond.

"That you are *not* concerned," replied the doctor, "and ought to be seen and not heard."

"Then, you oughtn't to talk Greek before ladies," returned the unabashed young damsel.

But it didn't seem Greek to Agnes, or,

perhaps, she was acquainted with that language. Mrs. Vane, too, seemed to understand it. As for Ernest, he began to feel that he was one too many.

"Mr. Tempest," went on Rosamond, who generally spoke twice to anybody else's once, "you must excuse Mr. Drummond; he always talks in double acrostics. I suppose he thinks it clever."

"Oh, I know him," said the barrister.

"But that's a very different thing from understanding him—I don't attempt to. I was never good at conundrums. You see, even Agnes doesn't know what he means. He's quite confused her."

"I'm afraid it's I, if anybody, who am guilty of confusing her," said Ernest.

"Not at all," resumed the surgeon. "Surely one may talk about one's wedding in the presence of one's best man."

What I want to know is, when is it to be?"

"That, you and Agnes must arrange between you," answered Mrs. Vane.

"Well, Agnes, what do you say?"

"Whenever mamma pleases," said Miss Vane.

"Mamma always pleases," remarked Rosamond.

"What pleases you the best will best please me," rejoined the mother; "but do you approve of early marriages?"

"Of my own I do," replied the surgeon.

"I approve of them," observed the younger sister.

"What do you say, Mr. Tempest?" asked the lady.

"Well," said Ernest, cautiously, "I don't approve of long engagements."

"That's a lawyer's answer," commented

fair Rosamond, who was like chorus in a play, the person having least to do with what is going on, but most to say about it. "And you, Agnes?"

It appeared that Miss Vane did not altogether disapprove of early marriages. The mother did not offer an opinion, but the eyes which had been looking fondly at her daughter were removed, and seemed to gaze again into the past. Still, she said nothing ; and it was arranged that George should marry Agnes before long.

The afternoon soon passed away, and in the evening they all went to church together, Agnes being religiously inclined, and Rosamond delighting in it as a little bit of dissipation.

Not until the dusk of summer night did the young men return to town.

"Well, Ernest," asked the surgeon, as

the two were separating, "what do you think of Rosamond?"

"A little minx," said Ernest. "Good-night."

And they went their several ways.

As Ernest lit his pipe and sat beside the open window of his own room watching the smoke wreath itself into the dusky air, St. Clement's chimed eleven in quite a comfortable way, and he reflected on the family which he had left, and congratulated himself upon having made the acquaintance of some very pleasant people. He thought most of Mrs. Vane; and that pale face, and those eyes looking backward, and that life going forward, haunted him; and there came to him, for the first time, grim and chill, some sense of the necessity of life, which forces us still forward to the future, though our hope lie buried in the past. He

rose to shut the window, and could just discern the river through the dusk. The sun was not shining on it now, but the river was streaming on.

CHAPTER IV.

"SEEING LIFE."

"I applied mine heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done upon the earth."—*Ecclesiastes*.

AND how did Ernest get through the long summer days when his apprenticeship was over, and the attorneys came not? If he ought to have employed his time in reading law, and sitting on back benches down at Westminster, I am afraid he did not do his duty: and small blame to him. Law is a study which a sensible man can pursue for nothing but pecuniary reasons. He who can devote himself to legal studies for their

own sake, is worthy of nothing better than the obscurity of a professorship or of a compiler of text-books : for law is no part of nature. It is a purely human invention, here to-day and gone to-morrow, having no foundation in the reality of things. A surgeon, or a man of science, studies something which is certain and immutable—a part of the creation : but a lawyer studies nothing but a set of human saws and judgments, in their very nature fallible and transitory. This consideration gives an air of unreality to his pursuit, which is intolerable to a man with any sense of the shortness of life and the magnitude of things. The game does not seem worth the candle, when the candle is so sorely wanted for more serious pursuits.

Moreover, Ernest was not a great reader. His instincts were rather those of a writer ;

and I question whether, as a general rule, those who write much are great readers. Even when they read, it is rather by way of refreshing and replenishing their minds for further writing than for reading's sake. The intellectual world may be divided into two classes—the readers and the writers; and the readers have decidedly the best of it. From very early years, Ernest had been accustomed to put down his thoughts and feelings upon paper. Travelling, as I suppose is usual, through poetry, he had emerged at last into plain prose; and at his desk he spent some portion of each day. He would have found it difficult to give a reason for so doing; for the greater part of what he wrote was read by no one but himself, and sooner or later found its way into the flames; and it was a great labour. Writing generally is.

Does anybody live, to whom the act of composition is a pleasure? Granted, there are times when the expression of its feelings is, to the excited or despondent mind, a great relief and comfort. Granted, there are favourite passages, in writing which even the irksome manual labour is forgotten. Still, in all sustained tasks, there are great long tracts of collar-work, in which one can feel little interest: and composition is about the most exacting and exhausting toil in which a man can be engaged.

Probably, the explanation of our hero's perseverance in this matter is the explanation of the vast majority of human actions—good and bad. They are not done for any reason, or with any object in the world, but from inherent impulses.

Ernest wrote — not because he liked

writing, not because he wanted to be a writer, but because he couldn't help himself.

Occasionally, he sent papers to the lighter periodicals ; but they were always "declined," with the invariable "thanks." At present Ernest cannot make this out ; for though he is not vain, he cannot help but feel that some at any rate of his own writing is superior to some at any rate of what is published, in the very periodicals which have rejected it. This very morning, he has found upon one page of a magazine, which has returned a little paper of his own, no less than three mistakes in grammar, to say nothing of its poverty of thought. He will be puzzled for some little time ; but by-and-by, he will find out the secret. Then, instead of trying to be lively, he will try to be suitable ; instead of aiming at

originality, he will content himself with being matter-of-fact ; instead of airing his opinions, he will do his utmost to suppress them : and he will turn out an article which may be better or which may be worse, but one which will be published.

In the evenings he employed himself in many ways. Sometimes, he went to supper at some brother Templar's ; sometimes he had parties in his own room ; sometimes he went long walks at midnight, through the quiet streets, and made the most magnificent addresses to imaginary juries, on his way ; sometimes, he went out on the moon-lit bridges, and there gazed upon the great, flat city with its myriad lights, and wrestled with the thousand, vague, wild dreams, and fancies, and emotions, which make up the chaos of a young man's brain ; sometimes, he went into the pit, and saw some play ;

and hoped some actresses, whom he especially admired, were better than their reputation—hoped, ay, even prayed sometimes : for young men do strange things.

And sometimes Ernest went to those assemblies and saloons, where mortal pleasure is supposed to reach its maximum, but which in truth are very dull and ghastly places, after the first sight : where young men—yes, and middle-aged, and old—see what is known as “life.” Ernest had too much sense to think this sort of thing was life ; but he had also too much sense to think that it was not a part of life, as life is lived. And so he went, from time to time, when he had nothing else to do, and was a grim spectator of those variegated scenes, where all the tawdry, tinselly bits of life are shaken up together, as it were, in a kaleidoscope, upon a background of

black tragedy. Silks and satins, paint and powder, brandy and tobacco ; gas and music, wine and waltzes, blasphemy and beauty ; jumbled up together in a sort of acted headache. Every now and then, he saw some faces that had obviously no business to be there—faces which he could picture in some quiet home, amongst fair children—faces formed in the image of God. These were a few ; but there were many there—oh, startlingly like ordinary girls—who clearly had got there by evil chance, and who by good chance might have been as virtuous as anyone. He talked to them sometimes ; and he soon found that they were not the wholly gross and utterly abandoned creatures pictured by morality. They even had their virtues ; and they seemed to him, in many ways, uncommonly like all the women he had ever known. In fact, he learnt, what it

were well respectability should learn : that all mankind, in virtue and in vice, is one.

Ernest had many friends who were not mere spectators in such scenes as these : and this was the great puzzle of his life. He had been brought up in a holy horror of this sort of sin especially ; and his views upon the subject had got hardened into fierce contempt of those who were less virtuous than himself, and something perhaps of pride in his superiority. A year or two ago, when he was living in the country-town where he was born, he would have indignantly denied that any of his own associates, or any gentleman, was guilty of such conduct ; but a year or two in London, and that wider knowledge of the world which comes of living alone in a great city, had by this time taught him what he was

most loth to learn—that his ideas upon this subject hitherto, had been the notions of a child : and nothing in his whole experience, as yet, had caused him so much sorrow and dismay. It had cost Ernest many a sleepless night and many a restless day—and much hard, honest thought—to come to the conclusion that men did these things, who were in all respects his equals ; to look down on whom was stupid pride and folly ; and that the doing of them was compatible with all the other virtues.

At first, it seemed to him as if to grant that this could be, was to lose hold of all morality ; but the fact stared him in the face by night and day, and he could shut his eyes to it no longer : and at last, when he had come to the conclusion of its truth, although with many a pang of pain and even rage, he grasped it fearlessly ; and it

was now to his mind one of the admitted but as yet inexplicable facts of life.

It was still a part of his belief, that these men added largely to the sum of human misery ; and it was a pain and puzzle to him still, to see that these were just the men who were most popular—especially with women. Poor Ernest ! there is many another sleepless night in store for him, and many a bitter day of self-humiliation, ere he learns it is good humour, and not moral character, that makes men popular ; and that the grossest of transgressions do not lessen human happiness so much as a bad temper, or a melancholy disposition like his own.

Do all young men go through these throes, I wonder ? I think not. It must be a great blessing to be born a fool.

CHAPTER V.

A SHADOW.

“Who can tell him when it shall be?”—*Ecclesiastes*.

SOMETIMES the Vanes accompanied George and Ernest to the theatre; for, strange to say of such a very quiet lady, the theatre was the one thing in the world outside her family in which Mrs. Vane appeared to take an interest. She seldom missed a new piece; she was very fond of being present on first nights; and Ernest quite enjoyed the child-like confidence with which she watched the stage's histories.

"Mamma," Agnes used to say, "you always look a beauty, but you never look so nice as when you're at the theatre. I'd rather look at you than at the play."

"Yes," added Rosamond, "you never look so young as you do then."

And Mrs. Vane replied, "I never feel so young."

There was some mystery here. A quiet, middle-aged widow, of a sad expression, with a passion for the theatre, was to Ernest an anomaly. But women altogether were.

He was an only child. His father had died many years before, leaving both Ernest and his mother comfortably off, so far as money can make mortals comfortable. He had never had a sister, and had consequently had few female friends; and he had grown up rather shy of women, whom

he could not understand. His friendship with the Vanes—for his acquaintance soon became familiarity—was quite a new experience for him, and he liked it.

It was Mrs. Vane, and not her daughters, who most interested him. Agnes was monopolized by George, and Rosamond was too much of a girl for Ernest's fancy, though he could not but admire her beauty. Mrs. Vane he made a study of, and very much she puzzled him.

One day he saw a portrait of her when she was a girl, hung in an upstairs room. It was the fairest and most radiant face he ever saw—the very image of her younger daughter's, but intellectual, and with brown instead of golden hair. It was an absolute impossibility to trace that face in Mrs. Vane's. He might as well have tried to recognize a wild Bacchante in a mild

Madonna. This looking at old pictures is as bad as reading yellow letters.

Then there was, in that white house at Kensington, a room which Rosamond called "Bluebeard's Chamber," where all the drawers were locked, and nobody but Mrs. Vane knew what was in them. It seemed pretty plain, whatever was the skeleton in that small household, it was kept in that room. And another curious fact was, that the family appeared to have no relatives. Neither Rosamond nor Agnes knew of any, and none ever wrote to them or came to see them. And most curious of all, from top to bottom of that house, there was no picture, photograph, or species of memorial of Mr. Vane. It was a most strange thing that if the settled sadness on the face of Mrs. Vane had any reference to him, she should not have a likeness of him, and had

never shown her daughters anything belonging to their father. And if that grave expression had no reference to him, what was the cause of it?

Ernest had many talks with her, and he discovered that she had, like many other quiet ladies who are seldom out of doors, a very wide and varied knowledge of the world. She was a well-read woman. She was intimate with all the standard works of fiction and of poetry. She could speak passages of Shakespeare off by heart. She was not unacquainted with the modern men of science and philosophy, although she rather sided with the pious people, and regarded natural philosophers though with respect, with some antagonism. Altogether, she was a sympathetic and intelligent companion.

I hope I shall not alienate the reader's

interest when I say that Mrs. Vane and Agnes used to go out visiting amongst the poorer people. I don't mean that they resembled in the least that awful woman who is animated by a sense of duty, and who has her "district" mapped out like the tax-collector, who pokes her nose in everybody's cupboard, and who leaves a trail of tracts behind her. Nothing of this sort. But they would visit the poor people whom by chance they got acquainted with, much in the same way as they would have called on anybody in their own position; and they simply sat and talked, and never let a word of patronage, religion, or morality escape their lips; and if they didn't do much good, at any rate they did no harm, which is more than can be said of most charity.

One day when Mr. Drummond had per-

suaded Ernest to walk out with him as far as Kensington, they found that Mrs. Vane and Agnes had gone out upon an expedition of this sort, and nobody but Rosamond was in. It was a hot, oppressive day, and the surgeon was a little disappointed not to meet Miss Vane.

"Of all the humbugs in this world," he growled, as he sank down into an easy-chair, and mopped his forehead with his handkerchief, "this farce of visiting old women is the biggest."

"And a day like this is!" said Miss Rosamond. "Just fancy going in those nasty places."

"Agnes has a cold, too. Why has she gone out?"

"Oh, going out can't do her any harm in this hot weather."

"Can't it?" said the angry doctor.

"This is just the beastliest weather possible, and I am very cross."

"That's evident," said Rosamond. "You must know, Mr. Tempest, George is always trying to make out that Agnes is not strong. I think he wants her for a patient. He has not very many, and I expect half those he has are his own making."

At this moment the bell rang, and in a minute afterwards both Mrs. Vane and Agnes came into the room.

To Ernest's eyes Miss Vane had never looked so handsome as she did this morning. Far from her round of visits having done her harm, the exercise appeared to have had quite an opposite effect. She had a colour in her cheeks, which he had never seen before; and her eyes sparkled when they fell upon the surgeon, in a way of which he would not have believed them capable.

The surgeon, too, seemed struck with her appearance. He did not instantly get up and welcome her, but sat just where he was, with his eyes fixed upon her, and with an amazed expression on his face. It was not till she spoke to him that he got up and spoke to her. He was not angry now. His anger generally lasted about half a minute, Ernest's about half a day. They did not stop long, for the surgeon had some business to attend to; and as soon as they were well upon their way, the barrister began the conversation, which was in itself a circumstance unusual.

"How pretty Miss Vane looked this morning, didn't she? I don't think I ever saw her look so well."

The surgeon did not speak.

"I'm very fond of Miss Vane," added Ernest, in that stupid way in which we go

on when we ought to have the sense to stop ; “ but I don’t call her handsome, as a rule. Still, I must say, this morning she looked positively pretty.”

The surgeon still said nothing, and this time the pause was too prolonged to be unnoticed ; so the two walked on, in the first awkward silence they had ever had. And when their ways diverged, the doctor only said, “ Good-night,” and went on, with a solemn look upon his face it was not wont to wear.

“ He’s thinking of some case or other,” muttered Ernest, as he turned down towards the Temple, and with that dismissed the matter from his mind.

CHAPTER VI.

CORNFIELD.

“There was a little city.”—*Ecclesiastes*.

THE sun is still shining on the river, but it is another river, this time—a black, busy, manufacturing stream, which sweeps at a great pace through the West Riding of Yorkshire, as if it had no time to lose. It runs through more than one small country-town, and gets a little blacker and a little filthier at each of them : for it is used for every purpose—both as the main sewer, and as the waterworks. It turns the mills,

it whirls away the refuse, and it furnishes the drinking water—which is perhaps the reason why it is so rarely drunk by the inhabitants, except with the infusion of a little whiskey.

To a stranger, Cornfield appeared to consist, principally, of its railway station and its gaol. It had only two streets, to speak of : one, of which, of course, was Northgate ; and the other, equally of course, was Southgate : for the Yorkshiremen are not versatile in the matter of street nomenclature ; and when they have used North, South, East, and Westgate, and the brilliant inspiration of Kirkgate, they are about done up. But it could boast of many a tall warehouse in its narrow bounds ; and many a fat cornfactor, who lived in peace and plenty, on the hillside, which composed its fashionable quarter. It had, of course, the

usual profusion of churches and chapels, and it positively owned a theatre.

This was Ernest's native town. He never liked it; for that dreadful river, sweeping through the place, and dashing headlong down those everlasting falls, and those cold Yorkshire stones, had always struck him with a chill of horror. There were few natural scenes which did not. There is always something awful about rivers, skies, and hills. There they flow, and stretch, and stand; and there they will flow, stretch, and stand; and that is all they care about. We sometimes think that they look brighter, when we're happy; sadder, when we're not. Not they. They don't care twopence.

He had been glad to get away to London, from this quiet place; and it was with a vague sensation of pain that he

again set eyes on the familiar streets, as he walked through them from the railway station to his mother's house. Perhaps the dim remembrance of some youthful love affairs, which had all gone wrong, had something to do with this ; perhaps not. Who can explain that melancholy feeling which familiar objects, which we have not seen for some time, generate within us ? Is it that the memories of the past are clustered round them, and that they remind us of the flight of time, and all that time has taken from us ? It is not a definite unhappiness. It is—

“—no sharp, especial sting :
Only that general, mystic pain,
Which distant memories always bring.”

And Ernest felt it, as he walked along.

But what is Ernest doing here at all ?
The fact is, it is sessions ; and the tradi-

tions of the bar require a barrister to "go" them. He might earn a guinea : he might not. He didn't, as it happened. Anyhow, it would, one way and another, cost him several pounds.

At first, he didn't come to them : but all his friends advised him strongly, that he really should. I don't think it was exactly in consequence of the advice of his friends, that he had come ; for when do we take the advice of our friends ? but perhaps the intimation of an attorney, who had business at these sessions, and who had told Ernest that he thought he'd better come, in that sort of a tone which seemed to say, "and if you do, I'll make it worth your while"—had more to do with it. I need hardly say that Ernest didn't get a brief from that attorney ; but he got a very jovial good-morning, and a compliment : and what else could he want ?

Still, he was glad to get once more amongst the old familiar faces, and to hear the old familiar voices. One may get as many new friends as one wants, but they can't take the places of the old ones. There is a sort of accumulation of kindness about those old friends, which makes their faces pleasanter to see, and their hands warmer to grasp, than those of any of our new ones. There is nothing like those old friends. They may have their little faults and failings ; they may disappoint us ; they may be the last to believe in us, and the first to give us up ; they may desert us, just when we are most in need of them : but they can never be replaced.

Mrs. Tempest lived alone, in the same house upon the hill, where she had lived for twenty years. How ever she got

through the days, and weeks, and years, I don't know. How ever half the women in the world get through the days, and weeks, and years, I don't know. It is positively terrible, to contemplate the uneventfulness of many people's lives. But she was quite as happy as she wished to be. Nay, I believe, if anything had ever happened, it would only have upset and flurried her. But nothing ever did happen, in Cornfield. And Mrs. Tempest liked it. Indeed, she rather pitied people with whom one day was not the counterpart of another; and who could not tell, to a moral certainty, exactly what they would be doing that day twelvemonths. For all that, she was very glad to see her son.

"Well, mother," Ernest said, when they had had their tea together—tea was Mrs. Tempest's dissipation—"you've not done

that anti-maccassar yet, I see." For Mrs. Tempest was knitting away, as if her life depended on it.

"Not done it, Ernest? I should think not," said his mother. "Why, I only began it last week."

"Last century, you mean. Why, you began it before I was born."

"Oh, Ernest!"

But it was a fact. It was a woollen piece of work—one of those things which cover you with fluff, if you go near them; and which are depressing, if you only look at them: but which women go on knitting, and will go on knitting, and covering their chairs and sofas with, until the end of time. Whether Mrs. Tempest was another Penelope, and undid each night what she had done throughout the day, is more than I can tell. Certain it is, that she began

this piece of work as soon as she was married, and had knitted on incessantly for five and twenty years, without making any appreciable progress.

"Why, you've changed the pattern," exclaimed Ernest, as he smoked his pipe, and watched her.

"Yes," said Mrs. Tempest. "I've put in a pine-apple."

"And whose idea was that?" inquired her son.

"It was my own," returned his mother, with perhaps a pardonable pride.

"I thought so," muttered Ernest, as he contemplated several yellow pine-apples, upon a pale-green ground.

"Yes, it was my idea," repeated Mrs. Tempest, gazing on them with a placid satisfaction.

And no wonder she was satisfied. It

had been an epoch in her life when she had changed that pattern.

"But about those singlets, Ernest?" inquired Mrs. Tempest, with a sudden seriousness; as much as to say, Now, having had our little recreation, let us come to the serious business of existence.

"Oh, I got them all right."

"But have you worn them?"

"Got one on now."

"Ernest," said his mother, with a tremble in her voice, and an expression of supreme concern upon her countenance, "I hope you had them aired before you put them on."

"I really don't know whether they were aired or not. I didn't air them."

"Oh, dear me!" resumed the lady, "why, you might have caught your death of cold. I aired them well before I sent them, but

who knows how damp they may have got upon the way?"

"They're dry enough now, anyhow."

"But think what might have happened. After damp sheets, there is nothing you should be upon your guard against so much as damp underclothing. The cases I have known, where inattention to these things has brought on the most serious consequences. There's poor Mr. Percival——" but we won't follow Mrs. Tempest through the cases she had known. They were numerous, and most disastrous: the enumeration of them might cast a gloom over the reader.

When Mrs. Tempest had concluded the sad recital, she devoted her attention to another part of Ernest's wardrobe—that which concerns the lower portions of the human frame. Ernest's legs had always been a trouble to his mother. They were,

it must be admitted, not quite so well developed as they might have been ; and Mrs. Tempest was acutely sensitive to this defect in her son's figure, which she strenuously denied. What mother cares a button-top for her son's brains, or want of them ? What mother does not anxiously consider her son's legs ? of what is she so proud, if they are good ones ? She would give an ounce of brains for half-an-inch of calf. But into these particulars it would be indecorous to inquire.

"Now, mother," said the barrister, when the examination was concluded, "where are we to go to-night ?"

"I've got plenty of invitations for you. Everybody said they hoped you would look in, while you were here."

"Have you got an invitation from the Greys?"

“No. Mr. Grey said that he wouldn’t send you one; that if you wouldn’t go without an invitation, you shouldn’t go at all.”

“That’s where we’ll go,” said Ernest.

“Very well,” replied his mother; “when I’ve finished this next row, I’ll go and put my things on.”

“I suppose they’re all well?”

“Except Mrs. Grey.”

“Of course. She never is. That goes for nothing.”

“I don’t think there is very much the matter with her. Edith has grown up a handsome girl. You’ll hardly know her.”

“I shall recognise her, I daresay.”

The truth was, Edith had been one of Ernest’s love affairs; but they had never hit it very well. At least, Ernest hadn’t. Edith had hit it about as well as it could be hit. She generally did; and Ernest

generally didn't. It was an old flame, but these old flames smoulder in young men; and the remembrance of it silenced Ernest's tongue, until his mother finished the next row, and went to put her things on.

"Grown up a handsome girl," growled Ernest to himself. "She always was a handsome girl. But I shall never get along with women—never, in this world. Who could, with a pair of legs like that?" and he extended them contemptuously, "and with a solemn face like mine, and nothing to say for himself?" But Ernest thought pretty well of himself, for all that, and had a sort of feeling that it was rather too bad of the women, after all. When down came Mrs. Tempest, and the two went out together.

CHAPTER VII.

THE GREYS.

“It is good and comely for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun.”—*Ecclesiastes*.

It was always a treat to go and see the Greys, and everybody thought it so, and everybody went. For you were always certain of a welcome, and of being made comfortable; which is a very pleasant background to a welcome. Mr. Grey was a large-hearted, prosperous man, who made a point of hospitality. He appreciated the good things of life, himself, and he liked

others to appreciate them. He worked hard, both publicly and privately; and he enjoyed himself as well. And he was in the right of it. But it was a necessary part of his enjoyment, that others should be enjoying themselves, too; and he did all he could to make them; and he never was so happy as when they were enjoying themselves at his expense. He kept a sort of open house, was always giving dinner-parties, and inviting people to make stays with him—such people, generally, as had not too many friends, and to whom such hospitality was more than common kindness. Finally, he had a touch of the gout in his feet, and the slightest touch of the gout in his temper.

Mrs. Grey was not so genial. She was a handsome woman, who had all her life been used to wealth and luxury. With

her, everything had prospered ; as with some people, everything goes wrong : and she had not sufficient brains to trouble her with the mysteries of life ; but, having every mortal thing she possibly could want, she found it necessary to invent distresses. So, she took it into her head to be a valetudinarian, and generally lay upon a sofa. Still, she was a handsome piece of furniture, and added to the general effect.

They had two daughters, who were courteous to their mother, but who idolized their father ; and assisted him, with right goodwill, in keeping up the traditions of the house, and helping in the dispensation of its hospitalities. One was Hester, and the other Edith. They were both good-looking, and of amiable dispositions ; and the little town of Cornfield could not boast two better hands at making whiskey-toddy.

Even the disgusting water of the Scalders—as the headlong stream was called—was sweet and fragrant, after their administrations.

But to Ernest, Edith was, or had been, more than this. She was a tallish, graceful girl, of perfect figure, and an oval face; with soft, grey eyes, and bright, brown hair. And clustered round her were a thousand memories, of youthful pangs, and throes, and agonies.

“How are you? Very glad to see you,” shouted out the hearty voice of Mr. Grey, as soon as Ernest and his mother were announced, and long before they got into the room. “Good-evening, Mrs. Tempest. Hester! Edith! take off Mrs. Tempest’s bonnet. Never mind the cap. Off with it.”

And the girls, who always obeyed their

mother, but who jumped to do their father's bidding, had poor Mrs. Tempest's bonnet and shawl off in half a twinkling ; notwithstanding all her protestations that she hadn't brought her cap.

" Mrs. Tempest — Mrs. Timmins," said the jolly gentleman ; and a meek little lady in a faded gown, who was seated in a corner, with a steaming glass of grog before her, rose, and bobbed a deferential little curtsy.

There was nearly always, seated in a corner of that room, call when you would, some meek little lady in a faded gown.

" Now, Ernest, what is it to be ?"

The steaming mixture smelt so very fragrant, Ernest felt he couldn't do better than select the same.

" Now, Hester, whiskey punch for Ernest !"

And in a moment, busy hands were

making it, from the materials which stood upon the table. And in a moment more, a huge cigar was thrust in Ernest's mouth, and in about two minutes he was seated on the hearth, as if he had been there twelve months.

"Nay, Hester," exclaimed Edith, who had been looking after Mrs. Tempest, and had only just observed her sister's occupation. "I make Mr. Tempest's punch."

"Both of you make it," recommended Mr. Grey. "Give him a double dose."

"I quite forgot," said Hester, instantly resigning the materials.

"And so did he," said Edith, taking them in hand.

"Oh, no, I didn't," replied Ernest; "but I thought that *you* did."

"I don't forget," said Edith, with a

glance of the grey eyes. For Edith was a flirt.

"I hope the heat is not oppressive to you, Mrs. Tempest," drawled the voice of Mrs. Grey, from her recumbent attitude upon the sofa.

"Not at all," said Mrs. Tempest, who would have said so if she had been suffocating. But it turned out, Mrs. Grey had wanted her to say it was.

"I find it so," observed that lady. "Hester, my dear, just open the door." And Hester slowly did as she was told.

"How do you like that cigar?" asked Mr. Grey, in his frank cheery voice.

"Uncommonly," said Ernest. "I don't know where on earth you get them from."

"Edith," halloa'd Mr. Grey. "Put half a dozen of those big cigars in Mr. Tempest's case." And in two seconds the

thing was done. "I know you'll excuse me."

Excuse him ! I should like to know who wouldn't excuse a man presenting him with half a dozen of the best Intimidads.

"I hope you're comfortable, Mrs. Timmins. Hester, Mrs. Timmins' glass is empty."

Mrs. Timmins' glass was not, nor anything like empty ; but she had to empty it, and have another, sharp. The little woman had had no experience of such attention, and her small eyes glistened. The punch was nice : but the attention was delightful.

"I suppose you're full of new friends now ?" said Edith, returning to the fancy-work, which she had laid aside ; as young ladies always do return to fancy-work, after

everything. I have come to the conclusion, that fancy-work is the substance of young ladies' lives—the background upon which what little events happen are embroidered.

“No,” said Ernest, “I have very few. In fact, I’ve only three.”

“All men, of course—uninteresting men,” continued Edith.

“That’s not fair,” cried Mr. Grey. “I wouldn’t tell, if I were you.”

“It doesn’t matter in the least,” she went on, “whether Mr. Tempest tells or not; he may be sure that I shall find it out.”

“I’ve found it out already,” remarked Hester.

“What have you found out?”

“That they are not all men.”

“Well, you’re quite right. They’re not.”

"It would be rude to ask you what proportion of the three are ladies, wouldn't it?" said Edith, who was getting curious: for though she didn't care for Ernest more than anybody else, a woman whom a man has been in love with always thinks she has a sort of vested interest in him.

"Well, to tell the truth," admitted Ernest, "they're all ladies."

A shriek of horror rose from the assemblage.

"Oh, I say," cried Mr. Grey. "That's more than Edith bargained for. All ladies! Hester, Mr. Tempest wants a light."

"I hope that you don't feel the draught," said Mrs. Grey to Mrs. Tempest, in her languid tone.

"Oh, not at all," said Mrs. Tempest: though a little bit of lace, which she had

somehow improvised as a substitute for the absent cap, was fluttering gaily in the breeze.

I am afraid that Mrs. Tempest didn't always speak the truth, when the imaginary exigencies of politeness made its contrary appear expedient.

"Edith, shut the door," said Mr. Grey, who saw the situation at a glance, and didn't see the use of arguing about it; and before the words were well out of his mouth, the door was shut.

"That's better," remarked Mrs. Grey, at whose request it had been opened.

"And now, tell us about these young ladies," resumed Edith.

"Ernest didn't say that they were young," inserted Mr. Grey.

"And one of them is not," said Ernest.

“ Oh, then two of them *are*,” Edith took him up.

“ That’s what I call ratiocination,” laughed her father. “ Edith has scored there.”

“ What are their names ?” asked Hester.

“ Vane,” said Ernest.

“ Are they all Vanes ?”

“ Yes, a mother and two daughters.”

“ But their Christian names ? I mean the daughters’,” inquired Edith ; who was now well settled on the scent, and meant to follow it.

“ One’s name is Agnes, and the other’s Rosamond.”

“ It’s Rosamond I’m interested in,” said Edith, with a woman’s quick, mysterious recognition of a rival.

“ She means by that, it’s Rosamond *you’re* interested in, Ernest,” commented the father.

"On the contrary," protested Ernest, "I am interested in the mother most; and least of all in Rosamond."

"Oh," said Miss Edith, not half satisfied, "I'm certain Rosamond's the pretty one."

"She is," admitted Ernest.

"Edith's scored again," exclaimed her father; who was always a sort of jovial billiard-marker of his daughters' conversation.

"Well, go on," said Hester. "You must tell us all about them."

"Have another tumbler before starting," cried the jolly gentleman. "Quick, Edith!"

"It's my turn this time," observed Hester.

"Yes, fair do's," exclaimed her father. "Hester has scored this time. Now, we're ready."

And to the accompaniment of rattling spoons, and sugar-tongs, and hissing urns, and gurgling bottles, Ernest told them all about the Vanes. Although he had not meant to do so, he conveyed a somewhat pathetic impression of Mrs. Vane.

“Poor thing!” said Mr. Grey, to whom the notion of a lonely woman was always distressing, “Poor thing!”

“But at least, she has good health,” drawled Mrs. Grey, “and that is a great blessing. Ah!” and Mrs. Grey sighed languidly, as if she was quite envious of Mrs. Vane.

“It is, indeed,” said Mrs. Tempest, who invariably joined the conversation when it turned upon the weather, health, and underclothing; seldom otherwise.

“It’s a blessing which some people won’t acknowledge when they have it,” observed

Mr. Grey ; who couldn't help being, now and then, impatient of his wife's imaginary ailments.

"And they aren't aware of it until they've lost it," sighed that lady, quite unconscious of the innuendo ; for long habit had persuaded her she was a genuine case.

"I like Agnes best," said Hester, "of the girls."

"And so do I," said Edith.

"Why?" asked Ernest.

"Because she is the nicest."

"Because she isn't the best-looking," said the father ; who had a man's absurd partiality for feminine good looks, and was extremely proud of his own daughters'.

"Not at all, papa," they both protested ; but it was no use. They didn't alter Mr. Grey's opinion, nor yet Ernest's.

"Throw that end away, and take another,"

shouted Mr. Grey, as Ernest put his pen-knife through the stump of his cigar. And a plethoric box was pushed across the table, and he had to do as he was told.

“Why shouldn’t we send for Bonamy, and have a game of whist?” continued the indefatigable host : and there appearing no good reason why they shouldn’t send for Bonamy—who lived a few doors off—Bonamy was sent for ; and speedily made his appearance. Anybody who was sent for by the Greys, always did speedily make his appearance.

“How are you, Bonamy?” cried Mr. Grey, as soon as the door opened ; as if he hadn’t seen him for a month, though Mr. Bonamy was there two nights a week, and welcome seven.

“How are you, Grey?” cried Mr. Bonamy, in a voice that it did your heart good to

hear; for Mr. Bonamy was another jolly old boy; and the two were as fine a pair as ever drank their toddy in or out of Yorkshire. "And how's Mrs. Grey?" But Mr. Bonamy had too much sense to wait and hear.

"Well, Ernest! very glad to see you. And how do *you* do, Mrs. Timmins?" he continued, as he looked into the quiet corner, for the faded lady he was almost sure to find there.

"Now, girls, who knows Mr. Bonamy's own mixture?"

Both knew Mr. Bonamy's own mixture, as what mixture didn't they know? and once again the grog-spoons rattled, and the spirits gurgled.

"Mrs. Tempest, this *is* dissipation! but it's a gala day, I suppose, now you've got Ernest back again. Oh, I say, girls!" cried

Mr. Bonamy, as he took a mouthful of the steaming mixture. "You *have* made it strong. Why did you, when you know I like it weak?"

And Mr. Bonamy laughed, and the girls laughed, and Mr. Grey laughed, and Ernest laughed, and even Mrs. Timmins laughed—in fact, everybody laughed, but Mrs. Grey: who never laughed at anything—for Mr. Bonamy's real preference was well known, and his assumption of dismay was an old-standing joke, which seemed to gain in flavour every time it was repeated.

"I heard to-day from Harry." Harry was Mr. Bonamy's only son, and only pride: he was, just then, at college.

A general buzz of interest passed through the assemblage—save that Edith went on with her fancy-work, and took no notice of the observation. It is often the case, that

those who are most interested in a turn of conversation, seem the least so.

“He is coming home in a few days.”

And everybody, except Edith, expressed their satisfaction; for Harry was extremely popular.

This was the first note of discord in the harmony of that most hospitable evening; for it was this Harry Bonamy who had put Ernest's nose out: and although it was a thing of the remote past, the defeat had stuck in Ernest's heart. It was a boy and girl affair, of course; but sometimes, boy and girl affairs have more substantiality about them than affairs of men and women, and they leave black marks behind them.

Edith made no sign, however, and did not seem to take the slightest interest in the gentleman; but Ernest had not watched

her little ways for years for nothing, and was not deceived by her absorption in her fancy-work.

He felt relieved when Harry was disposed of, and the whist-table was wheeled into position. Without any definite arrangement, but by a sort of tacit understanding, Edith was included in the whist-party; and fell to Ernest, when they cut for partners—Mr. Grey and Mr. Bonamy being their opponents.

Hester saw that the cigar-trays were all placed upon the table, and kept a watchful eye upon the glasses : for no glass was ever suffered to be empty more than half-a-minute in that household. Mrs. Grey and Mrs. Tempest talked about the prevailing weather, and its appropriate ailments ; and Mrs. Timmins twinkled in the corner.

Mr. Bonamy was one of those players

who always turn their chair before they sit down ; whistle, when they turn the trump up ; and clap their hand upon black deuces. With him, the deal was an interval for recreation ; but the actual playing was the most serious business of life. At all other times he was the very soul of geniality, and charity ; but whilst the cards were in his hand, he was as hasty, irritable, and excited an old boy as ever laid his own mistakes upon his partner.

It felt so strange to Ernest, to be sitting once more opposite those soft, grey eyes, at which he had so often gazed in hopeless helplessness, that he was not so quick in covering Mr. Grey—who sat on his right hand—as was desirable ; and inasmuch as Mr. Bonamy—who sat, of course, upon his left—was one of those fine players who make up their minds what card they'll play,

before the trick is led, and have it ready in their hand—this hesitation was exasperating.

“Come, come—play,” said Mr. Bonamy ; and Ernest played.

Out flew a little card from Mr. Bonamy, which Edith promptly took with one a little higher.

“What on earth did you do that for?” muttered Mr. Grey ; with whom, also, whist was a fine art.

“Oh, I was trying a little game on,” answered Mr. Bonamy, “but it didn’t come off.”

“It’s lost us two tricks,” murmured Mr. Grey.

“Well, well, we’ll see,” said Mr. Bonamy. “Come, come—play.”

It was Edith who was the offender this time ; but at last she played. And for a while the game went on in silence.

There was a strange paucity of trumps, which everybody seemed afraid to lead; until the game was half way through, when—bang, bang, bang, they shot out of the hand of Mr. Bonamy.

“Ha, ha, ha!” he laughed: for, now the hand was over, he could laugh more heartily than any one. “That’s two for us,” and he immediately scored up three.

“I didn’t lose so much, Grey, after all.”

“It’s very dangerous to bottle up your trumps like that,” growled Mr. Grey: for he had had a little game in his own hand, which Mr. Bonamy had knocked completely on the head: and what man wouldn’t rather make his own game than his partner’s?”

“Mr. Bonamy,” said Edith, in the sweetest voice, “you’ve scored up three.”

“Yes, three—of course I have,” said Mr. Bonamy.

“But you are only two.”

“Eh? aren’t we? then, it’s a mistake of mine,” and the jolly old humbug proceeded to rectify it, with the most innocent air in the world.

By exciting this little discussion, Mr. Bonamy succeeded in diverting his opponents’ attention from the fact, that they were two by honours; which accounted for his chuckling, whilst he sorted the next hand, until he nearly tumbled off his chair.

“Hester, my dear,” drawled her mother, “won’t you sing us something?”

“Oh, mamma——” Hester was beginning, in that tone of voice in which young ladies say they have a cold, or have not brought their music with them, when her father chimed in—

“Yes, do, Hester.”

And in a moment Hester’s hands were

on the keys. She played for a long time, and then she sang. Both Edith and her sister had delightful voices ; and sang the sweetest music, both together and alone. Not those hysterical voices, which are first up here, and then down there, and then the Lord knows where ; and not that pyrotechnic music, which reminds one of the boarding-school, and half-a-guinea a lesson ; but real human voices, with expression in them, and true music, which meant something. And though Ernest did not understand, and hated music, as a rule, he liked their music, and can hear it now.

But this did not help the whist ; and Mr. Bonamy's "Come, come—play," was heard more frequently than ever.

"Why didn't you trump it?" he exclaimed, as Mr. Grey put down a club upon a lead of spades.

"I did trump it," answered Mr. Grey.

"Nay, hearts are trumps."

"Excuse me, clubs are."

"Oh, I beg your pardon; I thought hearts were. It's no matter. Come, come—play."

It only mattered this much, that Mr. Bonamy had been forcing his partner when he ought to have gone trumps, and that it lost the trick, the game, the rubber, and the double rubber; but Mr. Bonamy's mistakes were always of no consequence; it was his partner's that made all the difference.

"We'll give it you," he cried, when he perceived the game was hopeless, and threw down his cards; by which manœuvre he astutely covered his mistake, which, if the hand had been played out, must certainly have been detected. "That's the game for

you. A single and a double are three, and three and two is four: that makes a shilling for you. There you are."

"Excuse me," Mr. Bonamy," said Edith, who was used to him, "three and two is five, and the odd threepence makes it eighteenpence."

"Is that so, Grey? No, three and two's not five. I say, Grey, what is three and two?"

"It's eighteenpence, that's what it is," said Ernest.

"Well, you shall have the money; but I always thought that three and two was four."

"When it's against you," interrupted Mr. Grey.

"And six, when it's on your side," added Edith.

"Ah, they're too much for me, Mrs.

Tempest. I must have a drop more whiskey."

"Hester, whiskey!" shouted Mr. Grey.

"Yes, Hester," added Mr. Bonamy. "You know how I like it: very weak, and very little of it." And a great deal of it, very strong, was given him accordingly.

At this point, Mrs. Tempest said it was high time to go, but Mr. Grey insisted on his daughters singing a duet before the bonnet was produced. The wish of Mr. Grey was his command, and so the mingled sweetness of two voices, which were made for one another, ushered out a night of harmony.

When Ernest came to say good-bye to Edith, and her hand touched his, and those grey eyes looked at him full, the old, old memories would come welling up—drat those old memories, will they never die?—

and the old wound began to smart again ; but before the lump had risen in his throat, and the water got into his eyes, another big cigar was thrust between his teeth, and with the heartiest of benedictions he was carried to the gate.

And when he had gone with his mother home, he went out for a quiet walk alone, and looked at the old windows he had gazed upon for years, and wandered down the ancient lanes, where he had wandered in his boyhood, with many an aching sorrow in his head, and many a wild passion in his heart. The sorrows were old sorrows now, and he had but the ashes of those passions in his heart ; but those old windows, and those ancient lanes, were consecrated. And then he thought of the good friends who had so warmly welcomed him again ; and all that night, and all the next

day at the sessions—where he got no work—and all the railway journey back to town, he thought of that frank, cheery voice of Mr. Grey, and those grey eyes of Edith, and that gracious music, and that steaming toddy, and those big cigars—of all those hearts so warm to greet him, and all those hands so glad to do him service. I hope we all know some such homes, where we are welcome—or were welcome, once.

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. POTTS.

“Folly is set in great dignity.”—*Ecclesiastes*.

DAY after day went by, and still the surgeon did not call at his accustomed times, until our hero almost thought he was offended; but, upon reflection, the idea of George Drummond being offended was dismissed as being too ridiculous, and so the barrister was driven to conjecture that the doctor must be very busy. This solution of the matter satisfied him, and prevented him from looking his friend up,

and so he went on with his ordinary avocations.

One day, when he was sitting at his desk with a clean sheet of paper on the slope before him, and a quill with a fine feather in his hand, waiting for those ideas which would not come—and which generally won't when one has made such elaborate preparations for them—he was startled by a strange knock. Could it be one of his attorney friends at last? He almost thought so. Truth compels me to confess that a short pipe was in his mouth, which he immediately consigned to his coat pocket; for, although the room was full of smoke, and it was hopeless to conceal the occupation he had been engaged in, it is somehow not so disconcerting to be found out in a past as in a present impropriety. He had no sooner accomplished this manœuvre, than a

head was cautiously inserted through the gently-opened door ; and then, but after a short interval and in an equally circumspect manner, the body it belonged to edged its way into the room.

“Mr. Tempest?” asked the stranger, a somewhat inky-looking man, of middle height and age, with a tall, black felt hat and piercing eyes.

“That is my name,” said Ernest.

The stranger, without uttering a word, edged sideways to the door, which he shut carefully, and still not saying anything, edged back again, and seated himself close to Ernest.

After a short scrutiny of the young barrister, who winced a little under those black eyes, the stranger gave a sniff and a short laugh, and uttered the one word—
“Tobacco !”

Ernest blushed a little, and stammered, "Yes, it's a bad habit I have got into, but—I—"

"All right," returned the stranger, bringing out the shortest and the blackest pipe the barrister had ever seen, "I'll join you."

Ernest's pipe was instantly produced from its receptacle, which by this time was getting rather warm ; and the two puffed away together.

"My name is Potts," vouchsafed the stranger, after a short pause and with the air of one who is communicating a state secret—"Percival Potts."

Indeed," said Ernest, trying to assume an interest in that important fact.

"I am," continued Mr. Potts, approaching closer still to Ernest's ear, "the editor of *The Weekly Newsletter*."

"Indeed," again said Ernest, this time with a genuine interest; for Mr. Potts was the first real live editor that he had met.

"You know a Mr. Johnson, don't you? Briefless barrister," interrogated Mr. Potts.

"Oh, yes, well," answered Ernest. "We eat many a term together, and we're very good friends."

"Johnson's going out of town."

"He told me so."

"For three months."

"For some time, at any rate. He's going out on a commission to take evidence in Chili, or some foreign place."

"Mr. Johnson," said the editor, in a portentous whisper, "has been doing our dramatic notices for some time."

"Yes, he told me so," said Ernest, innocently.

"Humph! He told you so, eh?" and then, after a tremendous puff, "that's just like Johnson!"

Mr. Potts reflected for some little time upon the likeness of that to Johnson, and then added, "We want somebody to take his place while he's away, and Johnson recommended you."

"Me!" exclaimed Ernest, "why, I never wrote a criticism in my life."

"That's nothing," opined Mr. Potts. "You have opinions, haven't you?"

"Yes, rather strong ones."

"Well, that's more than half the critics have. We don't want subtle criticism for the *Newsletter*. Give us your opinion, and that's all we want."

"But your opinion may be different to mine,"

"I have no opinions—except when I'm

writing leaders," Mr. Potts rejoined. "And then I have them only half an hour before I write them down. You're young and fresh—you have opinions, plenty of them. I had once, but I've used up all mine."

"Well," replied Ernest, "I should like to try my hand."

"You shall, then. That's arranged. Oh, you'll do. I've been looking at you, and you'll do. But look here—bear two things in mind. When you feel very savage, very pleased, or very anything—you write it all down—all of it—and put it in the fire. Then, write your notice."

"I see," assented Ernest; "you don't want superlatives."

"Superlatives are always wrong. No ecstasies—remember that, please, when you're noticing the women. No virtuous

indignation—think of that, when you are dealing with French plots. And most of all—no reasons. Say whatever you think proper, but don't argue. Lay it down."

"I understand."

"And finally," concluded Mr. Potts, "be independent—of course, be independent—criticism isn't worth a rush unless its independent; but"—this most confidentially—"if you should happen to be wavering between a strong word and a soft one, you might perhaps just bear in mind that all the theatres advertise with us."

"I shouldn't let that influence me, Mr. Potts," said Ernest, virtuously.

"Of course not! I don't ask you to. Of course, you mustn't let that influence you," concurred the diplomatic Potts.

"All I ask you is, to bear the circumstance in mind."

And so it was agreed, that Ernest was to wield the critical thunder in the dramatic department of *The Weekly Newsletter*.

"Know the *Owls*?" inquired the editor, when business was concluded, and the pipes were finished.

"What, the literary club?" said Ernest. "I have heard of it, but I have never been there."

"I'm just going. If you like, I'll introduce you."

This exactly suited Tempest, who had often wished to explore the mysteries of that sacred temple, with the exterior of which he was perfectly familiar. So he readily assented to the proposition, and the pair were soon upon the way.

The *Owls* was not one of your palatial structures in Pall Mall, but quite a modest building at the bottom of a narrow street which ran down to the river from the Strand. It was ostensibly a literary and artistic club, and numbered many literary men and artists amongst its members ; but with that inevitable leaven, to be found in all such clubs, of members whose connection with literature and art it would be very difficult to discover. Mr. Potts was a frequenter of this haunt, and certainly no man had a better right to be a member : for Potts was a press-man all over—none of your amateur dabblers, who combine occasional contributions to the press with other more remunerative avocations ; but a journalist, by birth and breeding, who had been familiar with scrawled copy and wet proof-sheets from his childhood. My de-

scription of him may not have been very flattering, and his inky aspect may be my imagination ; but I have no wish to speak of him with any disrespect. He is a type of a considerable class—a man of no particular education, but with a fund of wide and miscellaneous knowledge, both of men and things, that would shame many a student. The variety and scope of his information were something almost astounding ; and yet he was hardly ever out of London in his life, and certainly would have felt and looked most ill at ease in the most ordinary drawing-room. Where he had picked up all he knew of science, art, theology, philosophy, *belles lettres*, politics, society, and fashion, nobody could say ; but he had got it, and could use it to some purpose : which is more than most men can do with their knowledge. This inky-look-

ing man, who never was taught anything beyond his alphabet—who sprang from a low stock, and smokes a short black pipe—can turn you out, at half an hour's notice, a good, sound article, which even scholars and philosophers might read with profit, upon almost any subject under heaven.

The Weekly Newsletter, of which he was the editor, was not a fashionable but a thoroughly respectable and genuine newspaper, with a considerable circulation amongst what are called the middle classes; and by no means a bad paper, upon which to serve one's first apprenticeship to journalism. Its editor had graduated on the staff of many a more important journal, and was by no means a bad master under whom to serve.

I hope my reader has been taught by his

own observation never to look down upon a newspaper, because it is unfashionable, unimportant, or of only a small circulation. It is upon these papers that young men begin, and upon these that they expend the vigour and the freshness of their youth. There is no paper so obscure, but in it you may chance to light upon some article which would adorn the very best.

But here we are, upon the steps of the *Owls'* Club.

CHAPTER IX.

"THE OWLS."

"No man remembered."—*Ecclesiastes*.

ERNEST entered with some trepidation. He had often heard of the society whose hospitality he was about to share, and knew this modest building in a side-street was a favourite resort of many men whose names were household words—in fact, so many, that it was a little dangerous for a stranger to the club to pass his judgment upon current literature; inasmuch as it was quite upon the cards, the author whom you were condemning might turn out to be the very

person you were talking to. There was no guarding against this by careful observation, for there was no trusting to appearances. The very first man Ernest saw was a most dignified and intellectual-looking gentleman, whom he regarded with much reverence as being possibly the owner of a world-wide reputation, but who was in fact the porter of the institution; while he was about to give his hat and cane to a squat, common-looking, little man, brushing a coat inside the hall, and hissing over it like an ostler cleaning down a horse. But seeing Mr. Potts march on without removing his black felt, our hero thought it best to follow his example. It was well he did; for the squat, common-looking, little man was a distinguished poet.

Mr. Potts pushed on, and opening a green-baize door, the hum of many voices fell on

Ernest's ear ; and he could dimly see, through an opaque but fragrant atmosphere of smoke, a wonderfully snug and cosy room. It was about square, with upholstered benches running round it, broken here and there by an arm-chair, and dotted over with small tables. The walls were covered, from the ceiling to the floor, with all sorts of pictures—the productions of the members of the club ; and a few plaster casts of mythological and classic personages stood in various recesses round about.

When Ernest entered, he was startled by the piercing voice of a young gentleman, with tumbled hair and an intense expression ; who, with fearful volubility and an energy that was perfectly tremendous, was shrieking out the most profound and unmitigated contempt for the Christian religion, interspersed with paroxysms of the most

impassioned adoration of the poetry and sentiments of Mr. Swinburne.

He felt rather staggered ; but observing that the wild anathemas had no effect on Mr. Potts, and seemed to be received as a matter of course by the assembled company, he supposed it was all right. And so it was. The gentleman was only letting off, in private conversation, some of that superfluous steam which composition generates ; and treating his companions, and himself, to one or two of those best passages which editors have an unpleasant habit of cutting out. And Ernest afterwards discovered that he was a writer, gifted with great talents and a racy style.

Around one table, covered with a green cloth, four older men were, daytime as it was, engaged in playing for small points the mildly interesting game of euchre.

One of them—a pleasant, placid gentleman, with white, silky hair, and an expression of serenity which savoured of another world—appeared, to Ernest's fancy, a personified beatitude: if such a thing can be imagined smoking a short pipe, and playing euchre. It was an amiable fiction of this pleasant gentleman, that he was guided in his playing of the cards by the advice and inspiration of a great Italian cavalier of industry; who, though defunct, was able to communicate his forecasts; and was gifted with a superhuman power of prophesying wrong, and more than mortal wisdom after the event.

Another was an honest-looking, blunt, and rather clumsily-built man, who wore a speckled suit of rough material, and heavy boots—whom nobody would ever have taken for the sweet and graceful poet that he was;

unless they had remarked his gentle voice, which was in such strange contrast to the sentiments it uttered. There are some men from whose lips the grossest words and roundest oaths fall harmless ; for the kindness of their hearts shines through them, and you feel it is the idle habit of the tongue. He was a villainous bad player, and got cursed all round ; but, all the same, there was no member of that club who didn't love him for his honest heart ; and whilst there wasn't one he didn't curse himself, there wasn't one for whom he didn't feel a kindly fellowship and entertain a thought of charity. He seemed as popular with fortune as with everybody else, for he got all the trumps.

And buzzing up and down, and in and out, was a short, cheery, little gentleman, who had a smile and a kindly word for

everybody, and who seemed the mainspring of the place. A man who added business-tact to social qualities, and had a ready sympathy for everything. A man who could hold firm opinions lightly, and could argue with offensive disputants without offence himself. A voluble, mercurial, little man, who always ended with a laugh and pleasant word. A man, who, if he could praise others, praised them: and who, if he couldn't, didn't talk about them more than he could help. A man who went about the world, creating happiness; and happy in the occupation. Ernest noticed him at once; for, though a very little man, he, somehow, couldn't come into or leave the room, without your noticing a difference in the mental atmosphere.

“Who's that?” said Ernest.

“Mr. Liverpool,” said Potts.

There were some twenty other men about; for though the *Owls* was, in its nature, a night club—the chimes of midnight being its meridian—by chance it happened to be fairly full that morning. There were men of all sorts, shapes, and sizes; some well dressed, some right down shabbily; some drinking porter, some champagne; some smoking pipes, and some cigars: but all upon one level—there, at any rate—the shabbiest talking to the most genteel, the champagne drinking with the porter: all on an equality: for this is the republic of intellect.

Mr. Potts deposited his hat upon a little table, where he saw two vacant seats, and taking one of them, invited Ernest to the other. Tempest put his hat upon the table also, and laid down his cane beside it.

“Good God!” exclaimed a voice, that almost startled Ernest from the seat which he had scarcely taken. “Don’t do that, young man !” and Ernest’s cane was hastily removed from its position on the table.

Tempest looked up at the speaker, and discovered that the voice proceeded from a funny-looking, fat, old gentleman, who sat just opposite, and had appeared to be asleep when they came in.

But he was not. He was one of those funny-looking, fat, old gentlemen who always seem to be asleep, but who are very wide awake ; who can be very deaf when they don’t want to hear ; and who profess to be short-sighted, but can generally see which side their bread is buttered on, without the aid of spectacles.

Ernest, feeling that he had infringed upon the etiquette of the society—though

how he didn't exactly understand, for everybody seemed to do precisely what he pleased—was rather non-plussed, and was further disconcerted by the roar of laughter—like the laughter of so many boys—with which the fat old gentleman's excitement was observed.

"You don't know, perhaps," continued the old gentleman, who was no less a person than Mr. Orlando Cooke, the eminent theatrical lessee, and manager, and actor, "you don't know, perhaps, that I've a new piece in rehearsal."

Ernest didn't, and couldn't understand how Mr. Cooke's new piece could be affected by his conduct.

"Sir," explained the manager, "you put your cane across the table I was sitting at, I having a new drama in rehearsal. If I hadn't chanced to see it, my new drama

might have been damned—damned, sir!—damned!”

“It may be yet,” observed a young man with a light moustache, who had been an amused spectator of this little episode.

“And it may not, sir,” observed Mr. Cooke, oracularly. “Why should you presume it will?”

“I don’t,” returned the other; “I only said it might. I heard that you were going to play in it yourself.”

“I am, sir,” said the manager, not noticing the imputation; “and in it my son, William Shakespeare Cooke, is going to make his first appearance upon any stage.”

“Humph!” commented the light young man. “Too many Cookes.” He was connected with the comic papers.

“Cooke,” interposed a grave, bald-headed man—who had achieved a grave, bald-

headed sort of reputation in biographies and heavy literature, and who joined the group at the small table—"how in the world can you make out any connection between what a man does with his walking-stick and your new piece?"

"I don't attempt to make it out," retorted Mr. Cooke, "but I accept it as a fact which has been taught me by experience. You might as reasonably ask me what connection Friday has with failure."

"I do ask you," said the man with the bald head.

"Sir," returned the manager, with indignation—for here his most profound conviction was assailed—"did anybody ever know a piece produced upon a Friday run a month?"

One of those disagreeable persons, who appear to keep their memories stored with

inconvenient facts, for the express purpose of producing them when their production will make somebody uncomfortable, was, as usual, at hand—this time in the person of a smart reviewer, who remembered a case precisely in point, where Mr. Brewer, of the *Royal Polygon*, had brought a piece out on a Friday, which had run a hundred nights.

But Mr. Cooke was equal to him. Turning round upon the smart reviewer with an air of vindicated and triumphant virtue, Mr. Cooke requested this rash person to inform him where the enterprising Mr. Brewer was now. “In the Bankruptcy Court, gentlemen.” This there was no gain-saying. The reviewer vanished into an arm-chair, and Mr. Cooke was left the master of the situation.

“Post hoc, non propter hoc,” remarked a

mild and nervous gentleman, with sandy hair and undecided features, by profession a most formidable critic of the slashing order : but the manager was unacquainted with the Latin tongue.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Cooke," resumed the young man with the pale moustache ; "you'll give this gentleman a nice opinion of our common sense, with your confounded superstitions."

"I don't know the gentleman," replied the manager ; and Mr. Cooke was going on to indicate that the gentleman's opinion was to him a matter of indifference, when Mr. Potts broke in.

"Then let me introduce you. Mr. Tempest, my dramatic critic."

Mr. Cooke's demeanour underwent a sudden change. "I'm happy to make his acquaintance. Very happy. Glad to

know you, Mr. Tempest. What's your liquor?"

Whiskey turned out to be Mr. Tempest's liquor. Mr. Cooke, who was now thoroughly awake, professed that whiskey was his taste as well, and Mr. Potts was easily persuaded to confess to a similar partiality. Three tumblers speedily appeared, and the hospitable lessee paid for them, cheerfully.

Alas for human frailty! here was the virtuous Ernest, scarcely in the judgment-seat, allowing himself to be corrupted already.

The conversation, naturally, took a somewhat theatrical turn. What is called a "revival" of *Hamlet* was then taking place, and some dispute arose as to the amount of merit due to the Ophelia of the occasion. It turned out, of course, that each man had his own idea of Ophelia, and that each one

kept before his mind his favourite representative of that unfortunate young lady.

"What do *you* say, Rogers?" at last asked the manager of a tall, dark man—a noted critic—who had so far been a silent listener; and whose opinion, when expressed, carried the greater weight, from the reserve which he maintained respecting it.

The critic did not at once answer; for he was one of those few men who do not scatter their opinions broadcast, but regarded passing judgment upon anything as being a matter of some consequence, and worth reflection. But at last, he said,—

"It is quite possible that you may all of you be right. Ophelia is not a picture, but a sketch; and if the actress who performs the part does nothing inconsistent with the text, she is not limited to any special style."

But it was pointed out, that one way must be better than another; and which, in his opinion, was the best of all?

"Well," said the critic, "I suppose you none of you remember Helen Douglas?"

Mr. Cooke professed to have a recollection of the name, but no one else remembered anything about her. Even the omniscient Potts was silent.

"And this is a dramatic club!" exclaimed the critic. "Such is life. Why, twenty years ago, she turned the heads of half young London. She made no great reputation, but she was the best Ophelia I ever saw, and one of the most charming actresses of minor parts."

A snuffy little gentleman, who was an old frequenter of the club—whom no one seemed to know, and who was seldom heard to speak—begged pardon for his interrup-

tion, but desired to say that he remembered Helen Douglas perfectly, and often wondered what became of her.

The critic didn't know, and Cooke could offer no solution of the difficulty, save the supposition that she had got married—a proceeding which the manager appeared to think was, in an actress, much the same as suicide.

Poor Helen Douglas! she was one of those bright creatures of a day, who flutter for a while before the lights; and then are lost, except in a few faithful hearts, for ever.

But the tall, dark critic and the snuffy little gentleman had a drink together, to their common memory, and were always good friends afterwards.

"Why shouldn't you be a member, Mr. Tempest?" suddenly asked Potts. "Why

shouldn't you come and smoke your pipe here, now and then?"

"I should be very glad," said Ernest, "but I am afraid I have done nothing to deserve the dignity."

"But you have literary tastes," expostulated Potts.

"A taste for gin-and-water's quite enough," remarked the light young man.

"I understood you were dramatic critic of the *Newsletter*," exclaimed the manager, in great chagrin, and ruefully regarding the three whiskies he had paid for.

"So he is," asserted Mr. Potts; and Mr. Cooke was re-assured.

"Then I shall have much pleasure in proposing you, myself."

"And I will second you," said Potts.

What could Ernest do, but gratefully accept this kindness? The three rose, and

made their way into the hall, where Ernest's name was entered in a big book, which was signed by his two friends. Mr. Potts could spare no time for further hospitalities, and Mr. Cooke was overdue at a rehearsal ; so the trio said good-morning, and the barrister returned to chambers.

Thus it came about, that Ernest was proposed to be a member of the notable society of *Owls*, and by the very man upon whose drama he would shortly have to sit in judgment. Tempest fully felt the difficulty and the impropriety of this. He saw he was already in a false position. But how could he help it ? It would not have been courteous to decline to drink the whiskey Mr. Cooke had paid for, and it would have been ingratitude to have rejected the same gentleman's politeness in the matter of proposing him. Thus does the wickedness of this

world weave its meshes round us, making it impossible to be quite upright, just, and true—reducing all of us, at last, to nearly the same level of deception, insincerity, and humbug.

CHAPTER X.

MR. COOKE.

“Take no heed unto all words that are spoken.”

Ecclesiastes.

ERNEST was a little proud of his new dignity: and who shall blame him? When he looked out of his window the next morning, and beheld the same old fountain and the same old river, it appeared to him to be rather a different old fountain, and a little different old river. He felt as if it was not quite the same person who was looking out to-day, and who was looking out the day before. Yesterday, it was only

an ordinary briefless barrister, like fifty others who were staring out upon the same old fountain and the same old river ; but to-day, it was the dramatic critic of the *Weekly Newsletter*. Even old St. Clement Danes struck ten o'clock with something of a different tone, and " oranges and lemons " sounded quite original.

Of course, it is all vanity. The paradise is only a fool's paradise. There is absolutely nothing in it. What is the difference between a barrister who is a critic and a barrister who is not, compared to the solar system ? What's the *Weekly Newsletter*, and what the devil does it matter, to eternity ? The fly has only settled on another bit of wheel, and is mightily pleased with its new position ; but it is the same little fly, and its situation is a matter of supreme inconsequence. The Alps stand where they stood,

and the 'buses run to Bayswater as usual.

What of it? Let the young man rejoice in his youth, and let his heart cheer him in the days of his youth. He will learn soon enough to feel the emptiness of everything, and the years will come upon him all too quickly, when he will have no pleasure in them. It is these small follies—these heats and vapours of the brain—that give men energy to play their parts, and are the very savour and bouquet of youth. Happy the man who can preserve his vanities, and carry them along into his age: who, even in his zenith, can be pleased with a silk gown, or interested in a broad pink ribbon.

Similarly with the surgeon. He has quite recovered from his recent moodiness, whatever was its cause; and is as bright

and gay as any man, the course of whose true love is running smooth. I say of whose true love, because all men think their loves are true: but they are mostly vanity. Were any one to tell George Drummond that his love was a delusion, he would think that man a liar or a fool; and yet, that man would only speak the truth. For how can any love, that is the growth of only a few weeks or months, be worthy of the name? The thing that every man and woman who is born into the world fall into, at some time or other, is not love. It is not love that makes your ordinary man propose to your ordinary woman. It is not love your average husband feels for his average wife. It is a vanity that is common to mankind, and which may be the work of nothing more than an evening party or a morning call. Men talk of love

as if it were this common thing, which everybody is familiar with, and which will sometimes blow to fulness in a night. The truth is, there is only one man in a hundred, and one woman in a thousand, who is capable of love. The rest is tinder any spark will light.

George Drummond was no fool, and yet the love he felt for Agnes Vane appeared to him to go right down to the foundations of his life. It was in one of those poor neighbourhoods, where George had gone in quest of patients, when he was beginning practice, that he met the Vanes : who had—as we have seen—a habit, whether good or bad, of visiting such places. Acquaintance ripened into friendship : friendship blossomed into love—such love as mortals never felt before—that seemed to change the colour of the sun—that added hues

unto the rainbow—that made all things new—that felt as if it were the growth of half a life. But all the time, it was the growth of half a year—and vanity. Shall we despise the surgeon, therefore? Surely not. This life of ours would be intolerable, were it not for its delusions.

At last, he called on Ernest. Whatever the cloud was that settled over him a little while ago, it had evaporated, and the sun was again shining. Both the friends had news for one another. Ernest had to tell of his appointment to the post of critic to the *Weekly Newsletter*; and George was full of the important piece of information, that he was to be married on the twentieth.

“On the twentieth of this month?” asked Ernest. “Why, that’s in about a fortnight.”

"In about a fortnight," said the surgeon, cutting capers, with the poker.

At this juncture came the postman, with a letter from Mr. Potts, enclosing the magic "bone" which would entitle Ernest to the free admission of himself and one friend to the various theatres; and intimating that his duties would commence with Mr. Cooke's new drama, and the first appearance of his offspring, William Shakespeare, upon any stage.

"I'll tell you what," said Ernest, "let's all go together. Mrs. Vane's a first-rate critic; and it will be strange if we can't knock a notice up amongst us."

Drummond readily assented, and it was agreed that they should all be present on the tenth, which was the date appointed for the new piece.

The Vanes, however, did not go. Agnes

had not recovered from her cold, and it was thought imprudent to run any risk of making matters worse, in view of the important twentieth. Besides, there was a great deal to be done, and very little time to do it in: so George and Ernest went alone.

Fortunately for the peace of mind of the young critic, Mr. Cooke's new play was not a bad one; and his son was not so dreadful as he might have been. In fact, he played so tolerably, that, after making some allowance for his nervousness, the severest critic need not have said more than that he had mistaken his vocation. Ernest was astute: he spoke of him as "Mr. W. S. Cooke"—thus covering with the cloak of charity the error of his baptism—and warily reserved a detailed judgment on his talents as an actor, till he should appear "in some part

better suited to his evident abilities." Upon the whole, the barrister was able to commend the new production pretty freely, without too much outraging his conscience.

The notice in due course appeared, with no material alteration, save the printer's usual and playful transformation of the semi-colons into commas, and the commas into semi-colons: which is irritating to a young composer. It was the first time he had seen himself in print, and I am very much afraid, that his demeanour upon the occasion will depreciate him in the reader's estimation; still, as a faithful chronicler, I have no option but to set it down.

It was so strange, so novel, and so gratifying to see himself placarded in the streets, to notice himself lying on the bookstalls, to take himself up from the tables in the restaurants, and to sit opposite somebody

reading him in a railway carriage, that he positively walked half over London, rode all round it in the Underground, and had at least three lunches in three restaurants, in order to experience these pleasures. He knew that it was foolish, but he felt that he enjoyed it, and he had the sense to do it. It is sometimes wise to be foolish.

Don't laugh at him, then, very much, for there is no occasion. The wisest of us would appear a fool if his brain were transparent. Intellectual follies are the last which men relinquish ; and there is no man amongst us, howsoever sage, but would become a laughing-stock if all his inmost thoughts were patent to the world. The brain is guilty of sublime vagaries, and I question whether anything in life affords us greater pleasure than its self-conceited pranks and wild imaginations. Do we not

all find ourselves sometimes reflecting with complacency on things so trivial and absurd, we would not for the world have anybody know that we bestowed a second thought upon them? That neat remark we made, that compliment which we had paid to us, the way we took that fellow down, that leading article about us, that last speech of ours, are subject-matter for the most delightful meditation. Have we not all, in the privacy of our imaginations, fancied ourselves in some grand, heroic, or pathetic situation, in the like of which we never were and never shall be? Have not the wildest visions and the most outrageous day-dreams brought the blood to our cheeks, the sweat to our foreheads, and the tears to our eyes? Of course they have. Don't laugh at Ernest, then, for reading his own criticism ten times over,

and behaving himself generally like a lunatic.

The manager was almost as well pleased as Ernest was himself, or, at any rate, thought it politic to seem so.

It was at the *Owls* that the two met; for Tempest, though not yet elected, had received a notification that he might consider himself free to avail himself of the convenience of the club, until he should be formally elected as a member.

Mr. Cooke thought it prudent and polite to express to Ernest the gratification which he had derived from the perusal of the notice in the *Weekly Newsletter*. He was mindful also to express the satisfaction which his son had felt at such a generous recognition of his promise. He was conscious that William Shakespeare had not appeared to the best advantage. The fact

was, William Shakespeare had been suffering from a most severe cold in the head, and indeed it was against the express orders of his medical adviser that he had insisted on appearing, so as not to disappoint the public. Again, William Shakespeare's dress had not arrived till the last moment, and was found to be a misfit, and another one was substituted out of the stock wardrobe, which, of course, had disconcerted William Shakespeare. There were twenty other excellent reasons why it was impossible for William Shakespeare to do justice to himself. Unfortunately, most of them were contradictory, and none of them had any foundation in fact.

We may pardon Mr. Cooke for these inventions, which had their origin in natural affection, and deceived nobody; but it is impossible to find any excuse for what he

proceeded to do next, which positively was to persuade Ernest to begin to write a play. Why managers will do these wanton things, is one of the innumerable mysteries of "the profession."

"It's a most extraordinary thing," observed the manager, reiterating the old fallacy—and oh, how these old fallacies, which have been scotched, knocked on the head, exposed, exploded, and turned inside out a thousand times, do come up smiling for another round—"a most extraordinary thing, sir, how very few writers of ability turn their attention to the drama. There's a heap of money to be made, sir, and there's nobody to make it. There's Tom —— coining his five thousand every year, and Harry —— accumulating quite a fortune; and who else? No one—absolutely no one. And how many theatres

want pieces?—pining for them, starving for them, hungering and thirsting for them. Ah, if I was only a young man!”

Of course Ernest listened with both ears, for he had no experience of managers, and was naturally inclined to that most attractive of all forms of literature—the dramatic. He was led, like a lamb, to the slaughter.

“Do you really think that I could write a play?” he asked. “I mean, of course, a play that any one would act?”

“I don’t know any one more likely,” answered Mr. Cooke, who had said just the same to half-a-dozen other young gentlemen that very week. “You seem to me to be cut out for it. Why don’t you do it?”

The blood mounted into Ernest’s cheeks.

“Suppose I were to set to work and

wrote a piece, would you mind reading it?"

"I should be only too delighted," said the manager, with that air of candour which carries conviction with it, and in the end lands conviction in the ditch.

"And if you liked it, would you act it?"

"On the very earliest opportunity. My dear sir, I tell you I would put five hundred pounds upon this table at this moment, if I could lay my hands on a good piece. I am at my wit's end for one, and I will read anything."

And all the time, this same Orlando Cooke had, lying in his drawers, and on his shelves, and piled upon his table, at the theatre, at least five hundred dramas, comedies, and farces which he had not read, and which he never meant to read, and had his programme all arranged and set-

tled for the next twelve months. But just as the coquette delights to add one more to the huge holocaust of broken hearts which is the monument of her success, the manager delights to add one victim more to that vast pile of manuscript it is his humour to neglect and curse.

The consequence of Mr. Cooke's politeness was the usual one. Ernest thought him a most pleasant person, and ascribed the good set terms, in which he had heard managers denounced by literary friends, to the malignity of disappointment. Before he went to bed that night, he had, in his imagination, stepped before the curtain of a crowded theatre, and bowed his thanks for its reception of his play, amidst tumultuous applause. He went to sleep with that sweet echo ringing in his ears, and

mingling with the bells of old St. Clement's.

Meanwhile, Mr. Cooke was drinking gin and water at the club, without a pang of conscience for the cruel thing which he had done.

CHAPTER XI.

SICKNESS.

“Fears shall be in the way.”—*Ecclesiastes*.

NEXT morning Ernest set to work. In the frenzy of the night he had conceived a plot, or what might pass for one; and it was fortunate for him that his excitement had served such a useful purpose. He might possibly have had to cast about for weeks for the idea which came to him in the exhilaration consequent upon his interview with Mr. Cooke. But it was only an idea, and wanted a great deal of working out.

It is surprising what a very little bit of practical result these glorious fits of inspiration shrivel down into. A very noble frenzy, lasting some two hours, and carrying us over many a good mile of country lane or city pavement, will, when it comes to be prosaically written down, produce perhaps a page; which contracts into half, when the morning's judgment has revised the evening's exaltation. The rest is gas and refuse.

Ernest laboured at his story several days, sketched out his situations, and devised his characters. He felt quite happy when his scaffolding was done, and he began to lay the bricks themselves: that is to say, to write the very words the actresses and actors were to speak, and the spectators to applaud. It is a gala-day with an author when that drudgery is done—that work

which does not show, but which is of such vital consequence—and which he carries about with him, in the house, and in the street—an everlasting burden. But he found it was slow work, to a beginner like himself. He soon discovered that the drama was the most difficult of all forms of composition; requiring quite a different set of qualities to ordinary authorship. He found himself terribly harassed by technical difficulties—notably, the difficulty of getting people on and off the scene—without allowing them to drop into the “how-d’you-do?” “good-morning” style of conversation—and that supreme perplexity of telling all his story in the dialogue, without a line of comment or description by the way. How easy, by comparison, appeared the labour of straightforward leader-writing, and the chartered license of the novelist. At first,

it was a labyrinth, with stops at every turn: but still he persevered. I should not like to say how many hours it took, to write what it would take the actors some five minutes to deliver; but he plodded on, and by-and-by the task grew easier.

One morning, that mysterious, invaluable "humour," which makes toil a pleasure, seized him; and his pen went rattling on quite merrily; and, for the moment, he was grateful that he had no clients to molest him with their briefs. "I don't suppose that any one will call this morning," thought the barrister. "There's nobody been here for the last week, and I am precious glad they won't."

The thought had scarcely crossed his mind, when a light step came running up the stairs, and somebody tapped gently at the door.

“Confound it!” growled the busy dramatist. “Now who the devil can it be?”

The door was quickly opened, and disclosed his visitor. He was so much astonished at the apparition, that at first he could not speak.

It was Rosamond Vane.

“Excuse me calling on you, Mr. Tempest. I dare say you’ll think it very strange; but I can’t help it.”

Any anger Ernest felt at being interrupted in his labour, vanished at the sight of that white, stricken face.

“I want George. He isn’t at his rooms, and I can’t find him anywhere. Agnes is ill. She has been ill some days; but she is very bad indeed this morning, and is calling out for him. I thought you might be able to assist me.”

In a moment, the new comedy was

brushed aside, and Ernest's hat was on his head. His conscience rather smote him, that he had neglected the Vane family of late. It was but a few days since he had seen them ; but how short an interval suffices for great changes ! We turn aside for a few moments ; and when we turn again, there is a cloud where there was sunshine, and a blank in the place that was full.

He was familiar with the various hospitals, where the surgeon was generally to be found ; for he had often gone the rounds with him : and having hailed a passing hansom, they soon tried them all. It was the last upon the list at which they found George Drummond. Carved in the stonework of the front, was the inscription—
“Hospital for Consumption and Diseases of the Chest.”

The porter, who knew Ernest, let him

pass upstairs. Hurried as he was, the very first face in the first ward that met his gaze, reclined upon a background of white pillows, perfectly transfixed him : for on that face he recognised the very colour of the cheeks and sparkle of the eyes, which he had seen upon the face of Agnes Vane, the day when he had thought she looked so pretty, and when George's conduct was so strange. He understood it now ; and hastened on, with beating heart, to where the surgeon was engaged.

A word was quite enough for George. Bringing one of the physicians along with him—a young man, but one on whose experience and skill he could rely—the four were quickly driven to the small white house at Kensington.

The servant let them in, with a scared face ; and the two doctors went upstairs.

It had never struck Ernest that his duty was accomplished, when he found the surgeon ; and that if he went along with him he would be in the way ; but the idea could not help occurring to him, now that he was left downstairs with Rosamond.

He could not run away ; yet no position could be much more awkward, than the one in which he found himself : for he could not help saying something ; and it would have been a great relief to both, to have said nothing.

He never felt so satisfied with Rosamond before. There was commonly a pertness and self-satisfaction about that young lady, which, in his opinion, greatly marred her manifold attractions ; but to-day, there was such genuine sorrow in her face and voice, and her demeanour testified so great a love for her sick sister, that she won his heart.

She seemed to have grown ever so much older since he saw her last, and that was in itself a great improvement. There is something in the giggles of the fairest and best-humoured damsel, which is not altogether charming. Brains cannot be expected in a girl ; but it is unpleasant to be too pointedly reminded of their absence. There was nothing now but beauty, and intelligence, and sorrow, on the face of Rosamond ; and Ernest looked at her with admiration.

Of course, he asked for some particulars about her sister's state. It appeared, that Agnes had been ill in bed for some days ; but no one had thought anything the matter with her, other than an ordinary cold. At least, if George had thought so, he had not said anything.

" And do you think that she is really very ill ?" he asked.

"I do," said Rosamond, "because she does herself. She is not one who easily gets frightened."

"People are bad judges of their own condition," remarked Ernest—with a sort of feeling that he didn't in the least know what he was talking about, but that he must say something. "Very often' they are most alarmed when there is least the matter, and least alarmed when there is most to fear."

"I hope it is so," was all Rosamond could say.

By-and-by, Mrs. Vane came down—as calm, and cool, and self-contained as always, but with eyes not looking back just now. Ernest, who was young at reading physiognomies, thought all was right ; and was relaxing into an expression of congratulation, when she spoke.

Her voice betrayed her. Ah, that treacherous voice! We can school our faces, and control our fingers; but at the moment when we feel ourselves the firmest and we think we have our feelings in command, that wretched voice breaks down, and publishes our secret. It is all that lump in the throat, and that catch in the breath.

Rosamond was right. Agnes was very ill. How ill, the surgeons had not said. They had told Mrs. Vane that she had inflammation of the lungs.

CHAPTER XII.

DEATH.

“Man goeth to his long home.”—*Ecclesiastes*.

ERNEST got away somehow, and returned to chambers with a heavy heart. St. Clement's had a very melancholy sound; and after singing “oranges and lemons” in the dolefullest of tones, tolled twelve o'clock as if the strokes would never cease. The fountain, too, dripped dismally; but old Blenkinsop appeared to be driving a roaring trade, for the attorney's clerks skipped in and out quite merrily. And so it is. The

bell that sounded to our hero like a knell, only reminded Blenkinsop that it was twelve o'clock, and that he was behindhand with his papers.

There was something about Agnes Vane, who was not pretty, and whom he did not love, that made him very wretched to imagine her struck down with serious illness. I think it always makes us anxious, when we know that any one is ill, who is a little holier and purer than the rest of us : because we must have noticed what good taste Death has, and how he seems to choose earth's best and sweetest ones. Still, Ernest had no serious apprehensions ; and the next day found him labouring at his comedy.

Day after day, he ground away at quip, and crank, and repartee. It is hard writing, that amusing dialogue which drops so patly off the actors' tongues, and which the critics

deprecate as being "unnatural," or faintly praise as "smart." It is extra hard when you have nothing better than a ghastly hope that it will ever be delivered, and a sickening doubt if it will even be so much as read. Not that poor Ernest had this pang to bear, for he was young and innocent, and had as yet unbounded faith in Mr. Cooke's exuberant protestations.

He attended other first nights, too ; and wrote his notices. When he saw the sort of stuff that was applauded in the theatre, and tolerated by the press, he could not help but feel encouraged ; for without being vain, he felt that he could more than equal that. It never occurred to him that his better stuff might possibly not be applauded, and might not get acted : for he had not yet learnt that it pays better to play the fool than the philosopher.

He was plodding on through Act the First, when one day the postman brought a letter from his friend. It was written from Kensington, where it appeared the surgeon had been stopping night and day ; and was to the effect, that Agnes was much worse, and had expressed a wish that he should come and see her. Ernest had been once to ask about her ; but it was so long before the bell was answered, and the house had seemed in such confusion, he had thought it the best kindness not to trouble it with daily visits. He had no idea that matters were so bad as George's letter seemed to indicate. But they were worse : for he had scarcely read the letter, which bore date the previous night, when a messenger arrived with a short, scribbled note, beseeching him to come at once.

He jumped into the hansom which had

brought the messenger, and drove to the white house.

Poor little white house ! How pathetic seemed the situation of its inmates, who in their great trouble wanted him, almost a stranger, who had only known them a few weeks, to come amongst them ! George himself had only known them a few months, and George and he appeared to be their only friends. Poor little white house, how alone in the great world it was ! There was some mystery about it : that was certain.

The hansom took a sudden turn, and drove into the street in which it stood. The wheels ceased grinding over the macadam, and were plunged into a soft and noiseless bog. The road had been spread with tan : and the small house, with two upstairs blinds altogether drawn, peered sadly through the trees.

There was no waiting, this time. The door was quickly opened, and the confusion which had reigned the last time Ernest called, had given place to perfect stillness. He was shown into the dining-room—the room where it had been arranged, that George and Agnes should be married very soon—the room where it had been arranged they should be married on the twentieth. It was the twentieth to-day.

There is a weird air about a house when death is in it. You can almost smell it, through the medicated odours that are wafted from the sick-room. Even the creaking boards and jarring doors, that creaked and jarred as they never creaked and jarred before whilst only sickness was about, are hushed and awed at the approach of death. The cat which Ernest found upon the hearth seemed perfectly aware of

it ; and rubbed herself against him, with big mournful eyes.

For death *was* in that house. Ernest was sure of it, the moment the door opened, and he stepped inside. It did not need the young physician, whom he had brought with him on the previous occasion, to come down and tell him so. All men are superstitious ; and sometimes their superstitions coincide with truth.

The young physician did come down, however, and informed him of the facts. Not all their efforts, and the efforts of the others they had brought, could stop the progress of the girl's disease. The inflammation had extended, and assumed fresh forms ; and Agnes was now lying prostrate, at the point of death.

Rosamond came down as well—a poor, pale Rosamond, this morning—and they

went upstairs together. The boards on which they trod gave forth no sound, the doors they had to pass through opened noiselessly. It was small matter what they did. Things had got past that.

Ernest had expected to find Agnes very ill, but he was not prepared to find her as he did. He had never seen a mortal brought to such a pass before ; and he could hardly realise that the face which he had seen so rosy and so radiant two weeks ago, could be the face that lay upon those pillows now. So white—so very, very white—so absolutely still—and with the features standing out so clearly cut that, with the eyelids closed, they seemed carved out in marble.

He had been wondering what she would say to him, what he should say to her ; but all idea of such things vanished at the sight

of that white sculpture. The time for speech appeared to have quite passed away. They all stood round her, and were silent.

Raising his eyes a moment, they fell upon a figure standing opposite him ; and all nervous as he was, the apparition made him start, and nearly shudder. And yet it was only a clergyman—the clergyman whose sermon we were listening to, a month or two ago—an inoffensive, mild, white-haired old gentleman, as we have said before : but seeing him so unexpectedly, and in that crisis of excitement, he seemed almost like an undertaker.

They stood for a long time in silence, but by-and-by the clergyman began to pray. Poor old gentleman, he did his best to comfort and strengthen them, but he was a small, feeble creature, utterly with-

out the power of rising to a great occasion, or administering consolation to a single human being. Ah, who can? What words that any man can say can do it; let alone such words as he was master of? And as the poor, weak phrases fell upon the ear, and the forlorn prayers and ghostly hopes fell chill upon the heart, how artificial and unsubstantial the proceeding seemed beside the great and solemn reality which was before them. Ernest had never felt so poignantly before how powerless religion is before supreme calamities.

In the great distresses of the human heart there is a fierce, intense reality which brings us to our senses, and makes us feel the poorness and conventionality of the creeds we have so easily subscribed to, and the beliefs we have so carelessly inherited. There is nothing which so ruthlessly de-

mands a reason for the faith that is in a man as a great grief. It asks, and will not be denied. We search, and search, as we have never searched before ; and lo ! to our despair, in our sore need, it is not to be found. For grief will not be trifled with, and is not to be satisfied with texts and generalities. The bitterness wears by-and-by away, the intensity of the reality wears off, and our beliefs return : but in our need they fail us.

There was not one who stood around that bed, or knelt beside it, who did not feel their miserable unreality. Even the clergyman's own heart was conscious of it. But we cling to them—we cling to them. We dare not face the awful cruelty of nature. We turn our heads away, and will not acknowledge it. We clutch at shadows in our agony.

It appeared to Ernest as if all was over. The figure lay so deadly still, as if composed for its eternal rest. But it was not. The eyelids were at length drawn slowly up, as if they were great weights, and the dull glassy eyeballs were with difficulty rolled into their place. The rigid lips began to thaw, and then to move, and faint sounds issued slowly from them. Ernest could not make their meaning out, but there were those to whom love made it plain.

Oh, what an awful thing love is! How it illuminates, and how it desolates our hearts! What a supreme blessing, which an hour may turn into a curse! How it makes our lives a blooming garden, and anon a howling wilderness! What was this mother's, sister's, lover's love but joy a week ago? What is it now but grief?

No, not all grief just yet, for what they love is still a living soul, not yet a heap of clay. Still it can feel, and hear, and speak to them.

“Mamma,” murmured the grey lips—and Mrs. Vane took one of the white hands that lay so helpless on the coverlet—“I’ve been to sleep.” And the dull eyes attempted to put some expression on, but could not. “Mamma,” resumed the whisper, “have I been asleep long?”

“No, not very long, my dear,” said Mrs. Vane.

“What day is it?” returned the lips, quite suddenly, and with comparatively clear articulation.

“Wednesday,” answered Mrs. Vane, with a tremble in her tone: but “Wednesday” was so evidently not the answer which was wanted, and it seemed so cruel to compel

that feeble voice to put another question, that she instantly repented. She had tried to practise a deceit, as we so often do upon the dying, and she had completely failed, as is so often the result. Her heart smote her, and she added, of her own accord, "The twentieth."

"I must be getting up," resumed the lips, "or I shall be too late." And after a short pause, "I mustn't keep George waiting."

"I don't mind waiting, Agnes," said the surgeon. "I will wait any time for you."

The weary head rolled slowly over at the sound of the familiar voice, and the eyes were fixed upon him.

"What are *you* there for?" she whispered.

"I have come to see you," he replied.

"George," she continued, "I am very

ill. Don't tell mamma, but I am very ill."

"I know you are, dear; that was why I came."

"Oh, very ill! Don't tell mamma."

Then the eyes vanished, and the lids were closed, and there was a long pause again. And something of the feeling that George would indeed have a long time to wait, which was upon the hearts of all those watchers, seemed to gather in the mind of the sick girl; for when the lips next moved—which was not for some minutes—they spoke very plainly.

"I am going to die."

The surgeon gave a great gulp, and the tears came into Ernest's eyes. It was as much as Mrs. Vane could do to keep her self-control, but she did keep it. Only Rosamond broke down.

It is a dreadful thing—and seems more dreadful than it is—to know a fellow-creature feels that he is really dying—going from this world, and all its complicated joys and griefs, for ever and for ever—going none know where: and there was strong temptation to dispute the awful truth. But there was such a calm conviction in the sick girl's tone, the lie was shamed out of their hearts.

“George,” said the ashy lips, “George! we shall meet again.”

The surgeon's face went pale. It had been pale before; but now, it went as white as the girl's own.

“It's not good-bye!” And such a pleading look came into the dull eyes, that had been so expressionless.

The surgeon's hands were griping at the bed, and the bed shook. His hour had

come. This was what he had been dreading. This was what he had been expecting. This was what he had prayed might not happen. It was his Garden of Gethsemane.

"You think that we shall meet again?" persisted the white lips. "Don't—don't you, darling?"

Oh, God, you are too hard upon us! You tempt us past endurance.

"Yes," said George.

His face was calm, though white; but the bed shook still.

The girl's eyes closed again, the lips were silent, and a smile came over the wax features.

The surgeon could not bear it any longer. He turned away, and a great groan broke from him; he leant against the wall, and his frame shook from head to foot. He had been tempted with God's fiercest of temp-

tations—the despair of one we love. He had resisted—yes, he *had* resisted—like a man; but it had been too much for him, and he had fallen—like a man.

Agnes never spoke again.

She did not die for a long time—for nature dwells upon and revels in her miseries—but the eyes were never opened after that, the lips were never moved: the smile remained upon her face. Death came and chiselled in its curves amongst her features; and when, some time afterwards, the young physician told them life was gone, she lay there, smiling still, with the same smile that she had smiled when George had told her he believed that they would meet again. And when they looked at her, days afterwards, when she was lying in her coffin, she was smiling still. And when they laid her in her grave, and took their last look,

she was smiling at them. And when the earth closed in around her, and she lay beneath the sods, although no eye could see, she went on smiling till the grass grew over her.

The physician slipped out of the room when all was over, feeling that he was but an intruder; and being anxious not to trespass upon a grief which was sacred, with a sympathy which in the nature of things could only be professional.

The clergyman, too, after several well-meant but ineffectual endeavours to say something at once orthodox and consolatory, went his way. Rosamond's grief found relief in tears and lamentations; and it is a blessed thing when grief is able to relieve itself in such a natural and wholesome way.

Ernest did not like to leave George; for

the surgeon's state of mind was something dreadful. It was not so much grief as remorse that tore him. The clergyman—who did not understand him in the least—had nearly driven him mad by some of his allusions to the happy frame of mind in which the girl had passed away, and the blessed hope which had sustained her. Ernest did not altogether understand his friend, but did not trouble him with sympathy.

George Drummond did not want it. He was in one of those conditions in which men must be alone. There are some positions in which no man can assist us. We must battle through them by ourselves. The thought that preyed upon his mind was this: "She is dead. I shall never speak to her again; and with my last words I have lied to her, and she has believed me." For

George Drummond did not think that they would ever meet again. He thought that she whom he had loved with all his heart, was now no more than dust, and a sweet memory.

So let him think. It is a terrible belief, perhaps; but it is honest and sincere, and he must bear it.

Mrs. Vane. So calm, so cool, so self-possessed, so desolate. Oh, she had loved her daughter! Her Agnes had, in very truth, been all the world to her. Without a husband, without a friend, what was the earth to her except her daughters; and what were her daughters without Agnes? In her bereavement, she felt poignantly what she was only vaguely conscious of before, that it was Agnes who sustained her. It was no use dallying with truth, now. It was no use playing at parental morality —no use pretending that she made no differ-

ence between her daughters. There was the solemn, naked, awful truth—which is worth all the moralities in the world—staring her blankly in the face. Her Agnes but a little heap of dust! Her Agnes but a little clod of clay! And the rest of her life to be lived out, and the rest of the dismal world to be gone through!

And that Agnes—for whom she would have died—for whom she would have lived in agony—had gone away from her without a word of parting, without her name upon her lips. It had been all George—George! George, whom she had only known six months! It had been George, whom she had wished to meet again. It had been the thought of seeing George again, had made her happy. Not her mother.

Oh, cruel, cruel nature!

Still, she was calm, and cool, and self-

possessed. Still, she made the requisite arrangements. Still, she attended to all the pitiful details of this material life. With her heart broken.

This woman—this weak, pale-faced, little woman, who was doubtfully regarded by her neighbours—was the one who, in the awful grief in which her destiny had plunged her, was not overwhelmed. Her sun was blotted from the sky. There was no hope for her—for death is the one thing which shuts out hope for ever. She was all alone for evermore, without a single happiness; and still she went about the house, and saw that everything was done, which had to be; and spoke quite calmly, and moved here and there quite quietly. She did not shed a tear; but, when everything was done, she went into the room where her dead darling lay, and locked the door behind

her : and then, sinking down beside the bed, she laid her head beside her daughter's ; and lay gazing at the smile that dead white face was smiling, at the thought of again meeting some one else.

Ernest soon found he could be of no assistance, and that it was much better to be gone. How fresh the air felt, as he stepped into the street ! How bright the sun was shining ! The butcher's boy came whistling up the walk, while he was standing at the gate ; and he just sent him back in time. What a bustle of cabs, and carts, and omnibuses, and shop-windows, and people, there was in the Bayswater road ! And the great cloudless sky was stretching out above them all, looking as beautiful and heartless as only nature can.

And Ernest's soul rebelled against that blue, impassive sky ; and there came shoot-

ing through his heart a dreadful sense of the supreme inconsequence of man, and all his vanities, beside this awful nature, which laughs alike at human sorrows and at human joys, and goes on calmly working out its own eternal purposes. The sun rises and the sun goes down, the winds whirl about continually, the rivers run into the sea. "One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh, but the earth abideth for ever."

And when he got back to the Temple, there was the fountain dripping as of yore. St. Clement Danes was chiming the old tune; and Blenkinsop was busier than ever. He lit his pipe, and sat down listlessly beside the window. The sun was shining on the river, and the river was streaming on.

END OF BOOK THE FIRST.

BOOK THE SECOND.

CHAPTER I.

DIFFICULTY.

“Consider the work of God : for who can make that straight, which He hath made crooked ?”—*Ecclesiastes*.

It was many days before Ernest again saw the doctor ; for the barrister did not attend the funeral. Mrs. Vane was too much occupied with her great grief to send for him, and he did not feel that he had any right to intrude his presence in that forlorn household. It was one of his characteristics to feel as if he was intruding even where he was quite welcome, and would much have liked to go ; and thus he got a reputation

for coldness, which was, like the majority of reputations, utterly unmerited.

This sort of bashfulness, which is in the disposition, and there is no growing out of, kept him away from the Vanes just now ; and if they had been ordinary people, would have earned for him the opinion that he had no heart. And so it came about that Agnes was buried in a quiet corner of Brompton Cemetery, without his presence ; and with as little ceremony and demonstration as the undertaker would permit.

At first Ernest was a good deal affected by the death of his new friend ; but happily—or it would be a more terrible world even than it is—calamities that do not interfere with our daily avocations and continually thrust themselves upon our mind through the gap which they make in our lives, are soon forgotten. The mind, like the body,

is continually throwing off its secretions. Both our troubles and our joys are constantly evaporating; and if their cause be once removed or past, we are reduced, sooner or later, to the normal state of our peculiar disposition. Thus it was that Ernest found himself returning to his comedy, and writing his dramatic notices with almost his accustomed interest.

One of these has got him into trouble. He had occasion to criticise the performance of a lady of great beauty and conspicuous ability, who had somehow got into the hands of bad advisers and foolish admirers. These had circulated in the theatre where she was playing, and upon the hoardings in the streets, the most absurd and fulsome personal particulars; and on the night of her first appearance overwhelmed her with the most elaborate devices in the shape of

flowers and jewellery. This had so disgusted Ernest, that he came to the task of criticising the young lady with a most unfavourable bias, and exposed her few defects and faults in trenchant style. In fact, it was decidedly the best written notice he had yet done; but, unfortunately, it was not quite just.

Alas! how that same justice clogs one's pen, and takes the roundness out of all one's sentences! That odious "nearly," that horrid "almost," which are essential if one is to be quite truthful—how they spoil a phrase, and take the dash out of a paragraph!

Potts knew it wasn't just; Potts knew it wouldn't do; it was against all Potts's principles to pass it: but he did. In truth the editor admired good writing. If the sentiments were well expressed, I don't

think he was too fastidious what they were : and he couldn't find it in his heart to leave this criticism out, so he appeased his conscience by a little toning down, and forthwith it appeared.

So did Mr. Potts, at Ernest's chambers, on an early date. The short, black pipe was duly lighted ; and the impressive silence which its owner was accustomed to observe, preparatory to important communications, was maintained as usual.

"You're a pretty fellow," at last grunted Mr. Potts.

"What's the matter?" inquired Ernest, with a very shrewd suspicion what the matter was.

"Yes," rejoined the editor, observing this.

"That's it."

"My last criticism."

"Advertisement withdrawn this morning."

"Well," said Ernest.

"Well," said Potts.

"I can't help it."

"What was it I said about superlatives?"

"That I was not to write them."

"Then why did you?"

"Why did you print them?"

"Humph," said Potts, and took a very long puff at the black pipe. Then, after a pause, "Because I was a fool."

"And I wrote them because I was an honest man."

"Oh, these honest men!" mused the editor aloud. "How they upset society!"

"Mr. Potts," exclaimed the honest critic, "I am very sorry if the paper has lost seven and sixpence through my criticism; and if the paper chooses, I will pay the money;

but let this be clearly understood—I am not going to sell my conscience for a mess of pottage.”

“That conscience of yours will get you into trouble, Mr. Tempest, I can see, unless you teach it better manners. In the first place, it’s not seven and sixpence, it’s ten shillings. In the second, it’s ten shillings a week, or six and twenty pounds per annum. In the thir—”

“It’s bribery and corruption,” interrupted Ernest.

“Quite so,” assented Potts. “You see, we have the misfortune to live in a world of bribery and corruption.”

“*I* shall not be bribed,” said Ernest, curtly.

“Nonsense,” said the other.

“What d’you mean?”

“You *are* bribed.”

“How so?”

“Don’t you use their free admission?”

Ernest bit his lip.

“Everybody in the world is bribed,” continued Potts. “It is impossible to help it.”

“You might resign the free admissions.”

“In which case, entrance money would cost more than our theatrical notices are worth.”

“I begin to think that you assess them at about their value,” said the virtuous barrister.

“Well, you ought to know,” remarked Potts, unabashed; “you write them.”

Ernest laughed. Potts laughed, and when he had done laughing changed his tone.

“Look here, Mr. Tempest, I don’t care a straw about the trumpery advertisement,

for that's not my department. Besides, they'll put it in again next week. They daren't offend the press. We have one weapon they can't fight against — dead silence. But they have their little tempers, like us all. What I particularly came to say was, that I don't think you were just. You are one of those conscientious writers who are too lenient to duffers, and too hard on swells, and what is more, your pen is apt to run away with you. There is such a thing as the glow of composition. I know there is, because I had it once myself. I wish I had it now. Take care of it, encourage it, and prize it. It's the steam that works the engine. It's the quality that makes young writers valuable. But keep it well in hand. The best way is to give yourself right up to it at night, and ruthlessly revise it in the morning. Midnight is the hour of

genius. Mid-day is the hour of common sense."

"I think I *was* a little bit too hard upon her," confessed Ernest. "The fact is, she's so handsome I'm afraid of being beguiled into praising her unduly. I'll apologise next week."

"Good God!" exclaimed Potts, flinging down his pipe, with the only exhibition of deep feeling Ernest ever saw in him, "you'll do nothing of the sort. My paper may make a mistake. It's only mortal. But it never shall confess it—while I'm editor."

"Except under legal pressure," said the barrister.

This quite upset Potts; for he was aware that an attorney's letter is the one thing which can bring a newspaper to terms. He resumed his pipe, and after several silent

pulls, growled, "That's not my department."

"Oh dear me," resumed the young man, "I'm beginning to lose all my faith in that palladium of our liberties—the press. I used to think that papers were above the ordinary weaknesses of vanity and petty policy, which animate the ruck of men. I find I was mistaken."

"I should think you were. Why, there's no set of men on earth so sensitive and so impulsive as the literary lot ; but it would never do to say so."

"You have said it."

"Not in print."

It is noticeable that a writer never thinks he has said anything, unless he has said it in print ; and usually talks more randomly than any other man.

"Of course," explained Potts, "I am

speaking of contributors. If it wasn't for us editors, I don't know what you wouldn't say."

"We're more honest, that's it."

"Mr. Tempest," said the press-man, with some seriousness, "I like talking to you. There's a freshness about your ideas that reminds me of my own when I was your age. I admire you for your honesty—for you *are* honest—but take the word of a man who has seen more than most men of the inside of the literary world—it won't do."

"I should be sorry to think that," said Ernest.

"I am sorry," said the press-man, "but I know it. The only men who are successful are the men who write that which their readers sympathise with. Readers don't want honest thought. They don't want

other men's ideas. All that they want is their own, expressed in decent English for them. That's why twaddle is so successful. Readers think your writing good or bad, just in proportion as they agree with it. They only want their own prejudices justified, and their own passions pandered to."

"I quite agree with you that honesty may not be the best policy, regarded simply as a policy," said Ernest, "but I do believe that all men love and reverence honesty, and do respect an honest man, though they may disagree with him."

"But, my young friend," rejoined the older man, "if it is any vital principle on which they disagree with you, they won't believe that you *are* honest. Men don't love truth and virtue in the abstract; they only love their own idea of truth and

virtue. They have formed their own opinion as to what is truth and what is virtue. They are settled, concrete things : and if you don't agree with them, they'll call your truth falsehood, and your virtue viciousness."

"Well, let them. I'll be true and virtuous, as far as I am able, in my own sight, not in theirs," returned the younger man.

"Then, if your sight is different to the world's—and it *will* be different, for the world's is very short, and yours is rather long—you'll live a miserable life."

"I'll live it, then."

"You won't have a friend left."

"I'll do without one, then."

"You can't. No man can do without a friend."

"Well, I have one or two who would

believe in me, whatever I thought or did," said Ernest; thinking of George Drummond and some older friends still, who had known him ever since he was a boy, in the old country-town which he had left behind.

"You haven't *one*," persisted Potts. "The moment your opinions get beyond their comprehension, they'll renounce you."

"They know me too well to renounce me."

"Don't you try it on. They'll think they never did know you, and that you were imposing on them all the time."

"They are not fools," observed the young man.

"All men are fools!" exclaimed the old one. "Shock their prejudices, and you'll find it out. I tell you, if you're honest,

and your honesty is not the world's idea of honesty, you'll lead a miserable life."

"Then, I must lead it."

"But, damnation!" cried the press-man, getting almost angry—and it is to be remarked that the effect which the enthusiasm of youth, if persisted in, produces upon the cynicism of age, is always anger—"if you are completely honest, you won't be able to get a living."

"Nonsense," commented the critic.

"I tell you, Mr. Tempest, honesty won't do—at any rate, in print. Good-morning." And off Mr. Potts betook himself.

Although he had said "Nonsense," Ernest could not help reflecting on the press-man's words. Could it indeed be true, that providence had set so terrible a penalty on doing right? Could it be possible that honesty could cost a man so much? Was

it to be believed that it was in the essence of the providential scheme, that stern fidelity to one's own sense of right should, under any circumstances, bring a man so low? No, no : it was impossible.

He had just come to the conclusion that it was impossible, when his eyes fell upon the window ; and the wooden bars which held the panes together formed a cross ; and suddenly his thoughts went back two thousand years to that grim, ghastly satire upon all humanity which was enacted upon Calvary. He thought of how the man, who, by unanimous consent of all succeeding ages, is acknowledged to have been the greatest, noblest, holiest man who ever graced God's earth—went out into the world alone, to work out his own judgment against all mankind's—leaving his father and his mother, and flinging away his nice

little connection in carpentering—no doubt, to his father's anger, his mother's grief, and his friends' amazement—no doubt, stigmatised and shunned as an unnatural, obstinate, and selfish son, who had wilfully thrown away his chances. He thought of that grand life, with its supreme devotion to its own idea of what was truth, against the world's—always alone—misunderstood and unappreciated by its poor companions—despised and rejected by all respectable people. And then he thought of what we miserable mortals went and did to that most great and holy one—we nailed him up upon a tree. And Ernest felt that Mr. Potts was right: it was impossible for honesty to live. And so it is: for whose proverbial foolishness and copybook morality are not struck dumb, before that awful satire upon humankind?

But what though Providence had set this curse on doing right? Though honesty means misery and death, is honesty the less our duty?

Ernest thought again of that grand, miserable life. To what end had it been so faithful to its own pure light? With what result had it lost father, mother, friend, and happiness? With what effect had it lived desolate, and died forlorn? Two thousand years had nearly passed away, and Ernest saw that not one word of its great lesson had been learnt. It only meant one thing; it only said one thing; it only lived one thing; it only died one thing—charity. And it had scarcely touched so much as the outside of human hearts. He looked around him, and perceived that whilst humanity had made the most astounding progress in all other qualities, in this it had not moved

one step—not one step. He saw that if Christ came again to earth, he would be crucified again to-morrow—by the Christians: despised, rejected, and cast out by all believers; welcomed only, if at all, by heretics and infidels. He saw a thousand Christs—frail, erring Christs, but Christs in their small way—being crucified. Most melancholy sarcasm of all, he saw Christianity a bundle of crude creeds, and Christians the fiercest and most arrogant of men.

Is, then, the game worth the candle? Is a man bound to pay so great a price for next to nothing? Who can say? Happily for most men, ere their lives arrive at that most painful question, their strength has broken down, they have abandoned their allegiance to truth, and they retain their places in respectable society.

It may be they are right. It may very well be that men are not called upon to wholly sacrifice themselves and those they love. All nature is a heap of make-shifts and of compromises. And can man be more? When George Drummond lied to Agnes Vane upon her deathbed, doubtless he did wrong; but did he do so very wrong? May it not be that the old heathen preacher, who so often hits the mark, comes after all the nearest to the truth in his most daring cynicism, "Be not righteous overmuch: why shouldest thou destroy thyself?"

These problems weighed down Ernest's heart, for he was powerless before them. His brain reeled, and he could see no light, although his eye-balls cracked. They took the spring out of his step—the youth out of his heart; while all the world said,

“Well—if any one has all he wants, and should be happy, it is Ernest Tempest.”

Oh blind world, which never has the means of forming judgments, and yet is always pronouncing them—will it ever learn discretion? Never.

In those chambers in the Temple, where so many of the flower of English youth are living lonely lives, I wonder how many other hearts are breaking before the mystery of things.

CHAPTER II.

DOUBT.

“Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth.”—*Ecclesiastes*.

I'm afraid, young ladies—if any of them have waded with me thus far—will think very small beer of this “novel:” and for their information, I may tell them that this is going to be another dull chapter. And at the same time, I may advise all orthodox persons—if I have not shocked them long ago—that *they* had better skip this chapter, too. I am perfectly aware

that it is in exceedingly bad taste to introduce religion in a tale, and in still worse to introduce the want of it: but I should present a very imperfect picture of the inside of a young man's brain, if I devoted no attention to religious doubts and difficulties. And now that I have warned the young ladies and the orthodox persons not to read this chapter, I know they will: which is precisely what I wanted them to do.

Ernest went to bed with a heavy heart, and woke up with a light one. It is generally so with thoughtful youth. There is something in the freshness of the morning air which gives us a fresh hope. It is one of the most blessed gifts of nature—this new hope which we feel every morning. We don't know what we hope for, and we don't know why we hope for it, and we

haven't the least idea how it is to come about; but we are hopeful. Somehow all the arrangements of Providence will be altered. We have had precisely the same hopefulness every morning of our lives, and it has never yet been justified by the events of the day. We have always been reduced to the old melancholy by bedtime. But it comes up every morning, just the same, and always takes us in. What is this curious hopefulness which youth feels in a morning? I'm inclined to think it is the postman: for it has generally vanished, by the time we have read our letters.

Ernest rose with quite a literary fit upon him, and reeled off six whole pages of the comedy—a splendid morning's work. They would take about six minutes to act—that is, if they ever *were* acted—but no matter.

He had just risen from his desk, and lit

his pipe, with that satisfied feeling of having accomplished something, when he heard a strange step coming up the stairs. It couldn't be an attorney: that was too absurd to be thought of. It must be one of those genteel and voluble persons who accost you by your name and talk about the weather, while you wonder who on earth they are, until they produce an illustrated Bible publishing in monthly parts, or a History of England, beautifully coloured—who pervade all habitable space, above whom is no garret, and beneath whom is no cellar. The door opened—and it was George Drummond.

A very different George Drummond from the one who last came up those stairs. What changes a few weeks — a day — an hour—a postman's knock — may make in the appearance of the world! It was a

very different world to him now. All was dark and dismal : but there was still left—tobacco.

Dear tobacco ! The one true, faithful friend, that sticks to us through everything—consoling us, and comforting us always. Appropriate to all our moods—enhancing happiness, and mitigating sorrow. The one joy that never palls—the one employment that we never weary of : the profoundest blessing of material nature. Surely, the most cruel hardship which society—always unjust to women—has inflicted on them, is the ban which it has laid upon their smoking. True, it gives them some slight compensation : they have their embroidery and tatting.

Drummond lit his pipe—this time, without regard to his professional coat—and the two friends sat silent.

There is something in peculiar opinions, which seems to place a gulf between us and the man who holds them. We are ready enough to admit, as a general proposition, that everybody has a right to his own views ; and if we are challenged, we are bound to acknowledge, as an abstract principle, that it is a man's positive duty to form his own opinions, and not accept the views of others unexamined. But if examination leads him to conclusions very different from our own, our principles break down in practice ; and instead of honouring him more, we feel estranged from him. It is this that makes great men so lonely. The more they think, the more they know, the higher they soar, the further off are they removed from us ; and their friends are, one by one, left down below—until at last, they are alone. If they get very high,

we crucify them. Ernest was no fool. He had not, either, any deep religious prejudices. And yet, ever since that hour by Agnes Vane's bed-side, he had felt separated from his friend. That disbelief in any future life seems, to our silly souls, so terrible. The friend whom he had loved for years seemed made a stranger by his unbelief. And George saw this, and felt it, and it made the silence very long.

"Should *you* have said it?" at last blurted out the surgeon: for it was not his views, but his denial of them, that was troubling him.

"Yes," said Ernest.

"But if you had thought like me?"

"Yes," still said Ernest. "I could not have sent the woman that I loved away into blank space without a hope."

“And yet I ought to have done,” urged the other.

“It is impossible to do what we ought, always.” And then Ernest nearly choked, so sudden was the action of his mind : for it had caught him saying exactly what he had denied, when Mr. Potts had said it. How entirely our opinions are determined by our point of view, and what fresh lights are thrown on truth by looking at it from all sides : whilst, all the time, we are so fond of looking at it from just one !

“It *was* impossible,” returned the surgeon, “and yet, when the words had passed my lips, I seemed to hear the cock crow.”

“George,” said Ernest, suddenly—for if he hadn’t said it suddenly, he felt as if he couldn’t have said it at all, “don’t you believe in immortality ?”

"No," answered George.

The pipes were again smoked in silence.

"Why?" at last, asked Ernest.

"I can't tell why, exactly," said the other. "I have no one reason for my disbelief. It is the gradual growth of education, and experience, and thought. Men don't arrive at conclusions different to those which have been taught to them from childhood, and different to those of all the rest of the world, in half an hour, and not without much suffering."

"But is not the very fact that it is the belief of all the world, a strong argument in its favour?"

"None whatever. All the world once believed the sun went round the earth. All the world once worshipped idols. How many fallacies have once been the belief of all the world?"

“ But is not the belief or disbelief of one man still more likely to be wrong ? ”

“ Every truth was once the belief of one man. Every principle that is now universally admitted was once a chimera. Christianity itself—and I suppose that you believe in that—was, once upon a time, the crotchet of one man.”

“ But, George, belief in immortality is not so much the conviction of the human brain as the faith of the human heart. The world’s brain may not be worth much, but can the universal feeling of mankind be wrong ? ”

“ Why, Ernest, aren’t our feelings generally wrong ? Is there anything on earth so little to be trusted and so liable to lead us astray as our feelings ? It is because it is so much a matter of mere feeling that I doubt it so. Our wish is father to our

faith. We want to be immortal, so we think we are."

"But would that feeling have been planted in us if, on such a vital question, it was going to be disappointed? Could God be so cruel?"

"What can be more cruel than the whole of nature? Did you ever have a desire of any sort, out of the common order of things, that was not disappointed? Did any of man's expectations ever come to pass? Did any plan of man's work out as he expected it, from the foundation of the world? No; nothing happens but the unforeseen, directly you get out of every-day experience and ordinary consequences. The very fact that men believe it, is, if anything at all, an argument against it."

"But why should you disbelieve it?"

"Nay, the burden is on your side. Why

should I believe it? There is no presumption in its favour."


"Well, isn't this an argument—that nothing in the world is ever lost. You must admit the indestructibility of matter."

"Granted."

"Well, then, reasoning by analogy, the soul is indestructible."

"But what is the soul? no man can say; but all science indicates that it is just a property of matter, like the sight or smell. Death comes, and that mysterious matter is resolved into its elemental gases. It is not destroyed. But where's your immortality?"

"Well, take another view. Look at all the inequalities and injustices on earth. Are they never to be righted? Is goodness never to be rewarded? Is wickedness never to be punished?"



"All nature is injustice. She sweeps on to her determined ends, like a bloody tyrant, utterly regardless of the wrongs she does, and of the misery she makes. I see no reason for expecting justice. Besides, justice is impossible. A wrong once done is done, and can't be undone. No future life can justify injustice here. It might compensate the victim, but what is compensation but a rude device of man's? No, Ernest, justice is impossible."

"You're right on that point, certainly. A wrong can never be made right," agreed the barrister; "but it seems very hard to think that we shall never meet again the ones we love."

"It does," returned the doctor; "but even if there were a future life, the notion that we should be sure to meet our friends in it is childish. Seeing that the future

world would necessarily be peopled by all the generations of men who have ever lived in this and all the myriad other worlds that may exist in space, and seeing what an utter chance it is whom we meet here, and how little care nature takes about the people among whom we are cast, it seems to me absurd to think of meeting those we wish to meet, supposing that we had the means of recognizing them."

Ernest sighed, for he could not help feeling that this favourite argument of meeting our lost loves, is not an argument at all, but the despairing clutch of human hope that will never be extinguished.

"You see, Ernest," resumed Drummond, "if we claim a future life for ourselves, we cannot pretend to deny it to dogs, and horses, and the brute creation generally. It is the merest self-conceit in man to think

that there is anything in him essentially distinct from them. Nay, all our knowledge shows that man is only their superior in degree. Now, there seems nothing dreadful in denying *them* a future life ; and heaven knows, they suffer more injustice at the hands of man than even man does at the hands of nature. If anything in this world thoroughly deserves a future life of ease and happiness to compensate it for its wrongs on earth, it is a horse that has been purchased by a school of vivisection ; and yet who pretends that horse will live again ? The whole idea of immortality appears to me a vain invention of man's self-conceit."

"But can so glorious a faith be born of self-conceit ?" persisted Ernest.

"Are you sure it *is* a glorious faith ?" returned George Drummond. "Do you

feel quite satisfied this 'sure and certain hope' of immortality is not an ignominious fear of death? And why man should fear death, I don't know. Why man should desire to live for ever, with no reason for supposing that his future life will be ordained on any better principles than this, I can't conceive."

"The thought of absolute annihilation is so dreadful."

"Only to a fool."

The pipes were puffed again in silence. Ernest's thoughts roamed miles away into the little country town where still his mother lived; and thinking of her easy-going faith that everything was ordered for the best, and that anything which might be wrong would be put right some day somehow—for the simplest people can't help seeing that some things want putting

right—he could not help a little envying her simpleness, and wishing that he had no brains. Good gracious! what would she have thought if she had heard this conversation, in which her one argument—her panacea for all evils, the New Testament—was not considered of sufficient moment to be even mentioned. She was thinking of him at this instant, wondering whether he had got some nightgowns she had sent him. “The wisdom of one generation is the folly of the next.”

“The whole notion is a figment of man’s vanity,” resumed the infidel. “Who’s man that he should live for all eternity? and why should that eternity be made to gratify his feelings, which are changing every day? Of what importance is his life, and what are all his trumpery beliefs, and hopes, and fears, compared with the unbroken tramp of

time? All nature shows, that even this world was not made for man, but man for it. The end of nature is not man's delight, but some far-off gigantic purpose no man knows. What cares she for his life, or any life? In her luxuriance, she makes and takes away a million lives, for one that she lets grow. What's life to her?"

Ernest's little arguments were powerless before these strong convictions. He felt all his few remaining faiths were crumbling underneath him. He smoked vigorously. There was still tobacco.

"But, my dear George," he protested presently: "what you say of nature, and of matter, and of science, tends to show, not only that there is no future life, but that there is no God."

"Well?" said George.

A little word, but it pierced Ernest

through the heart. It took him a few moments to recover himself.

“Do you mean to say, that science shows there is no God?”

“No.”

Ernest breathed again; but the next sentence took the breath away.

“But I do mean to say, undoubtedly, it tends in that direction. And religious people feel it. Science and religion are inimical. Religious people may pretend that they are not afraid of science, scientific people may pretend that they have not a word to say against religion; but their seeming friendship is hypocrisy. The revelations made by science of the marvellous capacity of matter, may well frighten pious people.”

“But who gave it that capacity? True, science has gone back, through thousand processes, and almost reached the elemental

atom. But it can't go further. It can't say what made that atom."

"That taunt is not fair," replied the surgeon. "When science has discovered that those thousand processes, which were once thought to be the direct acts of God, are nothing more than the development of matter, the fair inference is that the development goes further back than it has yet been traced, or perhaps can ever be."

"But anyhow, it must get back at last to some creative act."

"And why should this most wonderful matter not create itself?"

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Ernest.

"Good heavens, is no argument," retorted George.

Ernest blushed: for he felt that the bar-sister had been upset upon his own ground,

and by a mere surgeon. Drummond followed up his victory.

“I see nothing more difficult of belief in spontaneous matter than in a spontaneous God.”

“And here, of course, as in the other case, you would make no account of the belief of all men in all ages?”

“I should not think such testimony worth a straw. It is in human nature to believe in any sort of supernatural phenomena. The almost universal belief in a god of some sort, is only a more refined manifestation of the same credulity which believes in spirits, ghosts, and witchcraft. The unknown is always the magnificent, and for the most part, the supernatural. It is mere superstition—the result of man’s supreme ignorance, and of the sense which the most ignorant of men must feel of his

own littleness beside the terrific forces of the material universe, and of his inability to cope with them, unaided. It is merely his own sense of weakness which induces him to fly for help to some one greater than himself, whom he invests with supreme power, much in the same way as a child regards its father as omnipotent, and thinks it is secure from everything upon its mother's knee. I no more despise the savage, worshipping a god hewn out of stone, than I despise the Christian, worshipping a god hewn out of faith : but I decline to recognise an argument in the pathetic attitude of either."

"But, surely, disbelief in the existence of a God is terrible," said Tempest.

"Why?" inquired the dreadful family practitioner. "Of course, that proves nothing, even if it is so ; there are too many

terrible things that are true: but it appears to me less terrible to believe in matter that does wrong to us unconsciously than in a God who wrongs us knowingly; or seeing we are wronged, is powerless to help us. An unjust God is horrible to contemplate: an impotent God is inconceivable."

"It is a mystery," said Ernest, helplessly.

"And always will be," said the surgeon.

They smoked on, again in silence. Do what he could, Ernest could hardly help recoiling from his friend; and George quite understood how he was feeling.

"Ernest," he said, after a long pause, and with tears standing in his eyes—for he had not recovered from the shock of death—"I don't publish my opinions. I impose them upon no man, and I cannot help them. I never told you even what they were, until

this dreadful sorrow let you see into my brain. Don't let them separate us. A man who has no God to turn to in his troubles, who disbelieves in immortality, and feels the dreadfulness of nature, has enough of misery without the reprobation of his friends."

And Ernest cursed himself for a cold-hearted fool, and shook the doctor's hand.

The pipes were out now, and the argument concluded. With the same slow, heavy step with which he came, George Drummond went away. And Ernest's heart went after him, down the stairs : for not all the differences of opinion in the world, not even the most terrible of sentiments, if only honestly thought out, can wholly quench the sympathies of a generous nature.

What do opinions matter, after all ? If any God there be, and any future life, they cannot be destroyed by unbelief ; and if

there be not any, neither can faith make them. What folly is this world's, which lets these figments of the brain go breaking hearts, which throb with the same human joys and woes—oppressing them, and seeking to exterminate them, even with abhorrence and wrath! What crime are they—whose fault? They gather, of their own accord, within our minds; and we must stand by them, and act by them, in spite of father, mother, wife, and friend—or be like Peter, and deny our Christ.

END OF VOL. I.



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